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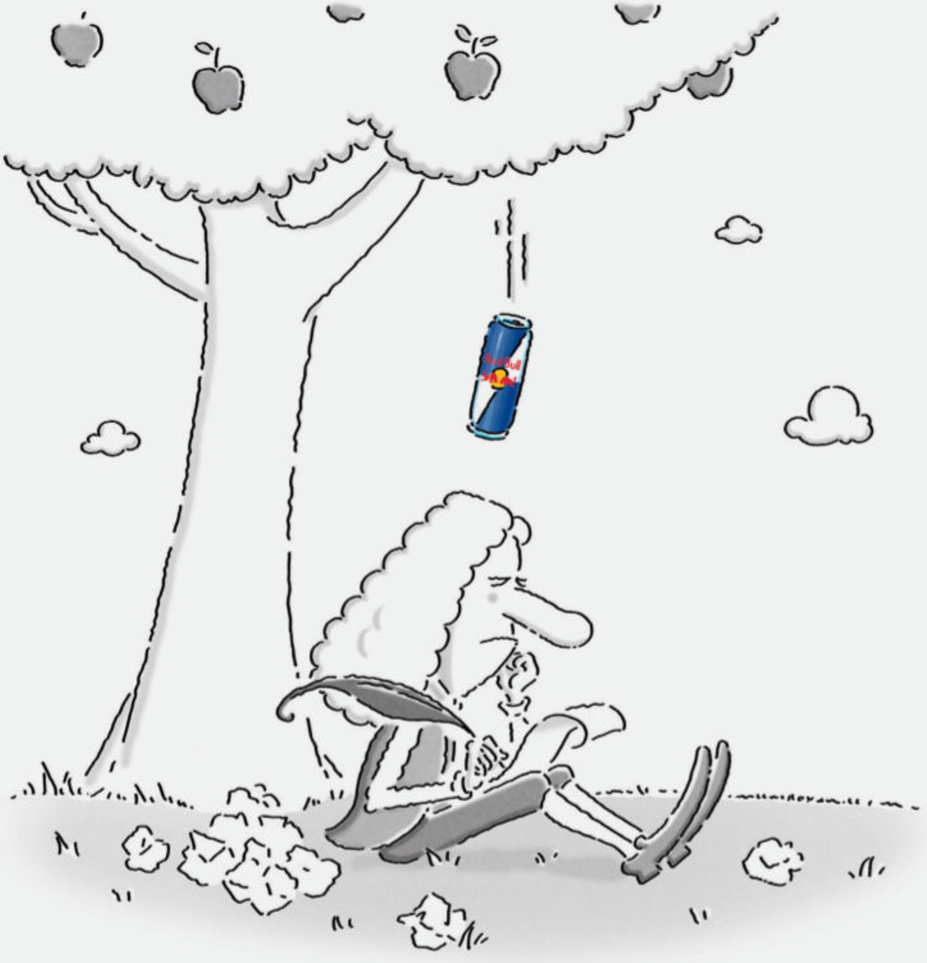

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THE WEEKEND ESSAY

When Middle Age Comes Into Focus
By E. Tammy Kim

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GOINGS ON

FALL PREVIEW

What we're watching, listening to, and doing this season.

TELEVISION

Tech Revenge, a Young Muhammad Ali

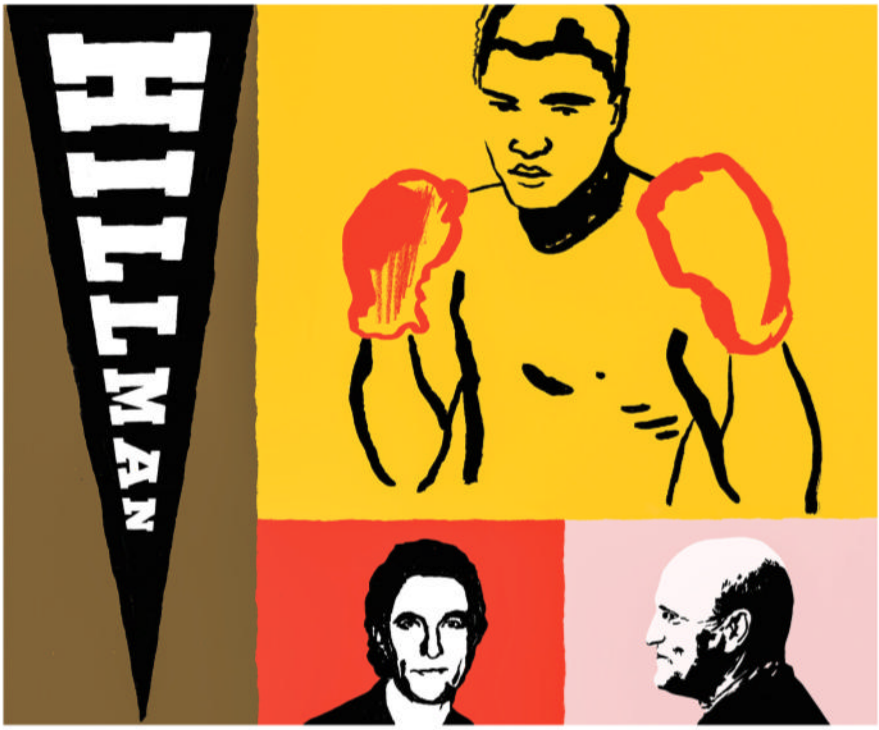
In the trailer for the new Russell T. Davies drama "**Tip Toe**" (Oct. 2), a flamboyant gay elder sums up today's social revanchism when he says, "I used to walk into a room and just go, *Ta-da!* Now I tiptoe—just in case." The TV shows that aim to capture the Zeitgeist this fall are few but brimming with potential. Davies, who came to prominence with the original "Queer as Folk," set in Manchester, England, returns to that city's night-life scene with the Starz series, in which Alan Cumming plays the owner of a gay bar contending with a homophobic neighbor whose bigotry is stoked by online radicalization. Internet cruelty also features in CBS's "**Cupertino**" (Oct. 8), the latest legal procedural from the "Good Wife" creators Robert and Michelle King. Mike Colter stars in the ripped-from-the-headlines drama, which centers on a new law firm that sets out to advocate for the victims of Silicon Valley's most powerful companies. In the case of HBO's divorce drama "**War**" (Oct. 1), the destructive pettiness of a tech mogul (Dominic West) is matched by that of his movie-star wife (Sienna Miller).

The next few months also offer up some offbeat premises. Foremost among them is Apple TV's meta-comedy "**Brothers**" (Sept. 23), which stars Matthew McConaughey and Woody Harrelson playing versions of themselves who discover that they may be related. The pair move in together, as McConaughey contemplates a Texas gubernatorial run. The immortal disapproval of the in-laws gets a supernatural spin with CBS's "**Eternally Yours**" (Oct. 8), in which a married vampire couple look askance at their daughter's human partner. And, on the heels of the surprise popularity of "Widow's Bay," the Netflix thriller "**Below**" (Oct. 8) finds a Newfoundland fisherman (Josh Hartnett) trying to stave off an enigmatic underwater creature from his coastal village.

But just as many shows seem to be betting on familiarity and nostalgia. Muhammad Ali gets the inspirational treatment in Prime Video's "**The Greatest**" (Nov. 4), starring Jaalen Best as an up-and-coming Ali. "**A Different World**" (Sept. 24), the "Cosby Show" spinoff set at a historically Black university, gets a Netflix reboot with returning fan favorites Jasmine Guy and Kadeem Hardison. Martin Lawrence, too, reprises his "Martin" character, in a new spinoff of that legendary sitcom; starring Tommy Davidson, Paramount+'s "**The Varnell Hill Show**" (Sept. 1) looks at the mayhem of TV production, from the point of view of Davidson's local talk-show host.

Late autumn reliably brings Halloween programming. The "Friday the 13th" franchise gets an A24-produced prequel in Peacock's "**Crystal Lake**" (Oct. 15), starring Linda Cardellini. And, despite three prior screen adaptations of "**Carrie**," the Stephen King character—a maladjusted high-school girl who takes bloody revenge on her bullies—anchors a new Prime Video series (Oct. 7) from the horror honcho Mike Flanagan, set in the present day. This time, Carrie's harassment is amplified by technology—but her rage remains timeless.

—Inkoo Kang



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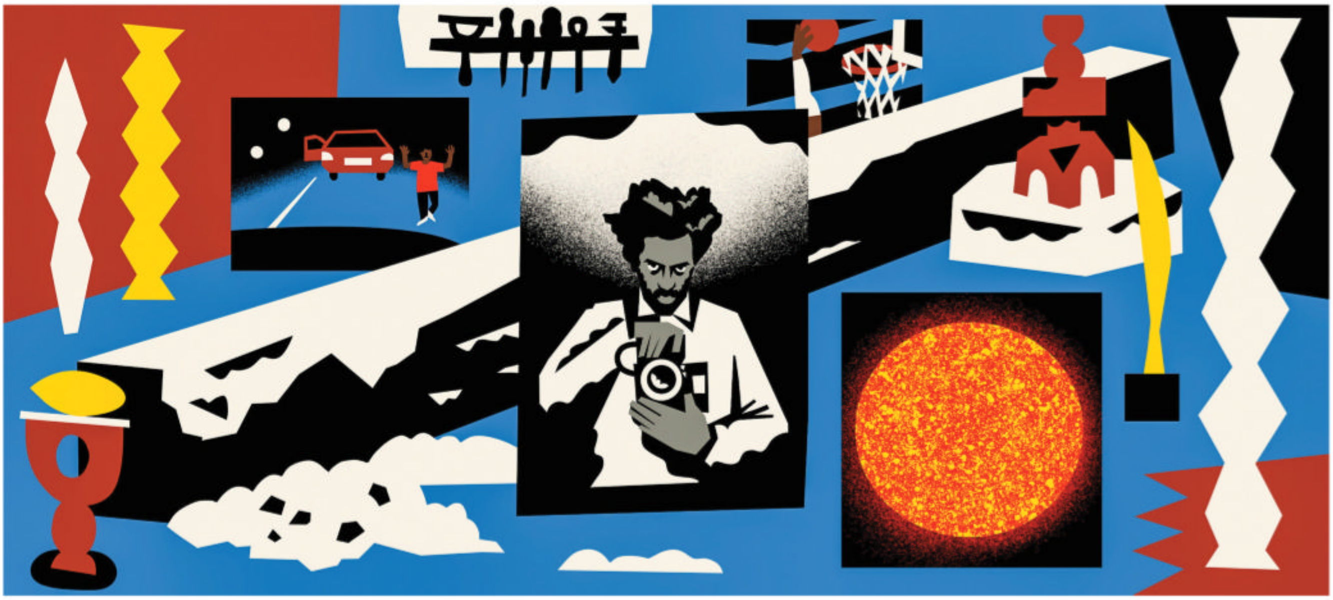

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ART

Modernism, Pop Art, Krasner and Pollock

Fall is arguably the biggest season for New York's museums, the time when they mount their most ambitious and scholarly shows—and this year does not disappoint. The highest-profile shows can largely be grouped into two categories: exhibitions that engage with canonical figures and those which spotlight long-working living artists.

Among the former, the Museum of Modern Art's **"Brancusi: The Artist and His Studio"** (opens Oct. 25) looms large. The modernist sculptor worked in the same studio, in Paris, for more than forty years; when he died, he left its contents to the French state, which built a replica of the space to display them. That site is temporarily closed, and many of the items—pedestals and furniture, photographs and tools—are coming from Paris for this show, giving Brancusi's cool, abstract sculptures a rich, human context.

The Whitney Museum is betting on a big name, too. **"Roy Lichtenstein: Like New"** (Oct. 11) reëxamines the prescience of the renowned Pop artist in our digital world. Lichtenstein's paintings are highly recognizable, but many people may not realize how much labor went into re-creating images from mass media by hand. This exhibition surveys the breadth of his practice, and includes a reproduction of his first Pop-art show, in 1962. A small companion exhibition at the Whitney, **"Roy Lichtenstein: 1997"** (Sept. 5), focusses on the last year of his life.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art is taking a slightly different approach to revisiting history. **"Krasner and Pollock: Past Continuous"** (Oct. 4) isn't the first exhibition to put the storied Abstract Expressionist couple side by side, but it may be the most comprehensive. Jackson Pollock was more famous, but Lee Krasner outlived him by almost three decades. The show navigates these complexities while moving through their lives, including the twelve years that they were married. It places them on equal footing—a feminist corrective that's been a long time coming.

In the contemporary camp, the New Museum leads the charge with **"Arthur Jafa: I Am Tony"** (Sept. 24), the artist's largest exhibition yet. Jafa started out as a cinematographer, working on films such as Julie Dash's "Daughters of the Dust," from 1991, before transitioning to his own projects. He broke through in 2016 with the short video montage "Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death," which captures the painful contradictions of African American life. This expansive show features not just moving-image work but also paintings, sculptures, and installations.

Though they come from different backgrounds, Jafa and **Teresa Margolles** are kindred spirits of a kind: artists of similar ages transmuting sociopolitical realities into potent art. MOMA PS1 is mounting a survey of Margolles's work (Sept. 24), which is rooted in her training as a forensic pathologist. The exhibition's centerpiece, "La promesa" (2012), is a neat rectangular sculpture made of rubble from an abandoned house in Ciudad Juárez, a place infamous for high rates of femicide. In tandem with the show, MOMA is displaying a new work by Margolles in one of its collection galleries (Sept. 17).

Taryn Simon takes a similarly conceptual approach to complex subjects. This fall, she's filling the Guggenheim Museum's rotunda with **"Father Country I Do Love You"** (Sept. 18), a project that's been in the works for nearly a decade. It tracks the life and times of a bureaucratic federal agent, but obliquely, in Simon's typical style, using photographs, text, and other works to reveal a refracted narrative. If you prefer more straightforward storytelling, visit the Brooklyn Museum's **"Art of Manga"** (Oct. 3), which explores the popular Japanese comics form primarily through the work of eight seasoned artists.

—*Jillian Steinhauer*

THE THEATRE

Family Affairs, Classics Revised

This fall’s stages brim with families, each exquisitely disconsolate in its own way. The parents in Jon Robin Baitz’s drama **“Other Desert Cities”** (Hudson; previews begin Sept. 29), which stars Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Ed Harris, and Allison Janney, face a threat to their social standing in the form of a daughter’s forthcoming memoir. The new musical **“Wanted”** (James Earl Jones; Oct. 15) adapts the story of outlaw twins on the lam. Simon Stone’s reupholstered **“The Cherry Orchard”** (Park Avenue Armory; Sept. 16) transposes Chekhov’s squabbling aristocrats into Korean tycoons in Seoul. Daniel Fish directs Anne Carson’s translation of Sophocles’ grimmest masterwork, **“Elektra”** (Polonsky Shakespeare Center; Nov. 10), based on the ancient tale of familial revenge. A young woman chases her mysteriously vanished father (Frances Jue) through San Francisco’s Chinatown in Lauren Yee’s surrealistic comedy **“King of the Yees”** (Signature Theatre; Oct. 6). In Nick Payne’s **“The Unbelievers”** (Manhattan Theatre Club at City Center; Oct. 13), with Lauren Ambrose, a family reckons with the disappearance of a beloved son, while **“2:22: A Ghost Story”** (Lucille Lortel; Oct. 20) suggests that empty houses are rarely as vacant as they appear. Richard Nelson adds another installment to his Rhinebeck political play cycle; **“We’ll See”** (Public; Oct. 25) follows the Apple family on Election Night of the 2026 midterms.

Classics get a reboot at several venues. A revival of **“The Fantasticks”** (Hayes; Oct. 22) remixes the longest-running Off Broadway musical ever as a gay romance for Broadway. Steven Pasquale makes his directing début with Clifford Odets’s **“Waiting for Lefty”** (Classic Stage Company; Oct. 15), turning a Depression-era cab-strike drama into an immersive union-hall vote. A clubby **“Much Ado About Nothing”** (Winter Garden; Oct. 31), directed by Jamie Lloyd, stars Tom Hiddleston and Hayley Atwell as the sparring singletons. Emma Rice brings her company back to St. Ann’s Warehouse with her determinedly upbeat **“Tristan & Yseult”** (Nov. 1). Molière’s **“The Imaginary Invalid”** (Todd Haimes; Sept. 25) features Bill Irwin as the titular patient, whose gibbous self-regard and baroque health rituals are exfoliated for our looksmaxxing age. Life is both lived and understood backward in the première of a musical adaptation of **“The Curious Case of Benjamin Button”** (Public; Oct. 8), starring Andrew Durand. The cast of August Wilson’s bluesy **“Seven Guitars”** (Mitzi E. Newhouse; Nov. 5), directed by Ruben Santiago-Hudson, includes Roslyn Ruff and John Douglas Thompson. A slick military lawyer uncovers a coverup in **“A Few Good Men”** (Vivian Beaumont; Oct. 8), with Bradley Whitford as the iconic antagonist.

Contemporary conversations drive many new works. Maria Dizzia directs Marin Ireland’s play **“Pre-Existing Condition”** (Greenwich House; Sept. 1), about the aftermath of domestic abuse, with a rotating cast that includes Susannah Flood, Hari Nef, Lupita Nyong’o, and Phillipa Soo. Else Went’s **“Degenerates”** (Playwrights Horizons; Sept. 16) ventures into an incel community. Anne Washburn’s **“ANON—a tempest at our kitchen table”** (MCC; Sept. 25) finds a TikToker at odds with her Texas neighbors after a Pride flag is unfurled on a suburban street. Sarah Jones débuts her solo show **“America, Who Hurt You?”** (Polonsky Shakespeare Center; Sept. 10), and Billy Crystal, in **“860”** (Imperial; Oct. 1), tells us about his house that was consumed by the Palisades Fire.

For those looking for a good time, **“Ms. Blakk for President”** (Vineyard; Oct. 15), co-conceived by Tina Landau and Tarell Alvin McCraney, resurrects the gleefully insurgent 1992 Presidential campaign of the drag queen Joan Jett Blakk (Wayne Brady). And Jocelyn Bioh’s joyous **“School Girls; or, the African Mean Girls Play”** (Samuel J. Friedman; Sept. 8) thrusts a class of Ghanaian boarding-school seniors into open combat over a beauty crown; Denée Benton, Patina Miller, and Jasmine Amy Rogers star.

—*Rhoda Feng*

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MOVIES

Outer-Space Monsters, an Elon Musk Doc

Creature features arrive from around the world, starting with the South Korean director Na Hong-jin's science-fiction drama **"Hope"** (Sept. 9), in which a small-town police officer joins with local hunters to fight reptilian monsters from outer space. Alex Huston Fischer and Eleanor Wilson's comedic fantasy **"Wicker"** (Oct. 23) stars Olivia Colman as a medieval fishmonger who, when she can't find a real-life husband, commissions one (Alexander Skarsgård) made of the titular material. Takashi Yamazaki's **"Godzilla Minus Zero"** (Nov. 6), premièring at the New York Film Festival, brings back the *kaiju* icon, in a drama set in Japan in 1949.

The season's wide-ranging documentaries include John Wilson's first feature film, **"The History of Concrete"** (Sept. 18), an idiosyncratic exploration of the ubiquitous substance, which leads him from Queens to Rome, Ohio, and Las Vegas. The first part of Julia Loktev's "My Undesirable Friends" showed the filmmaker's journalist friends in Moscow facing persecution; in **"Part II—Exile"** (Oct. 9), she shows many of the same people continuing their work outside Russia. **"Once Upon a Time in Harlem"** (Oct. 16), filmed in 1972, by the late William Greaves, gathers many of the then elderly luminaries of the Harlem Renaissance for discussions and reminiscences that bring the era's personalities and achievements to light; the film was completed posthumously, in 2025, by his son, David Greaves. Little is known about **"Musk"** (Oct. 16), Alex Gibney's investigative portrait of Elon Musk, other than its four-hour running time.

New literary adaptations include **"Virginia Woolf's Night and Day"** (Sept. 4), based on the author's 1919 novel, about a wellborn woman (Haley Bennett) who, in order to pursue a career as an astronomer, rejects an arranged marriage; Tina Gharavi directed. Georgia Oakley's **"Sense and Sensibility"** (Oct. 16) gives Jane Austen's novel, about the romantic tribulations of the financially straitened Dashwood daughters, a fresh workout; the cast includes Daisy Edgar-Jones, Esmé Creed-Miles, Caitriona Balfe, and Bodhi Rae Breathnach. The thriller **"Verity"** (Oct. 2), based on a novel by Colleen Hoover, stars Dakota Johnson as a writer who comes to suspect that a successful author she's been hired to ghostwrite for (Anne Hathaway) has committed murder.

Comedy is joined with the megawatt celebrity of Tom Cruise in Alejandro G. Iñárritu's **"Digger"** (Oct. 2), about an oil tycoon who is summoned by the President (John Goodman) to head off an environmental catastrophe. In Josef Kubota Wladyka's **"Ha-Chan, Shake Your Booty!"** (Sept. 25), set in Tokyo, a widowed ballroom dancer (Rinko Kikuchi) becomes infatuated with a married dance teacher (Alberto Guerra). Maude Apatow directs her mother, Leslie Mann, in **"Poetic License"** (Oct. 16), about a middle-aged woman who audits a class at a local college and becomes romantically entangled with two younger students (Cooper Hoffman and Andrew Barth Feldman).

The season's bio-pics veer between mind and body, modern times and history. **"By Any Means"** (Sept. 4), directed by Elegance Bratton, is based on the true story of the mobster Gregory Scarpa (Mark Wahlberg), who, in 1966, collaborated with an F.B.I. agent (Yahya Abdul-Mateen II) to investigate the murder of civil-rights activists in Mississippi. Michael Dowse's **"The Stunt Driver"** (Sept. 25) stars Jay Baruchel as the daredevil Ken Carter, who sought to drive a rocket-powered car across the St. Lawrence River in the nineteen-seventies. **"Primetime"** (Sept. 25) dramatizes the development of the TV program "To Catch a Predator," featuring Chris Hansen (Robert Pattinson); Lance Oppenheim directed. Aaron Sorkin's **"The Social Reckoning"** (Oct. 9), a sequel to "The Social Network," stars Jeremy Strong as Mark Zuckerberg, whose former employee (Mikey Madison) discloses internal workings at Facebook to a journalist (Jeremy Allen White).

—*Richard Brody*

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DANCE

Homage to Oscar Wilde, Sinéad O'Connor

Much of the excitement coming to dance stages this fall arrives via visiting companies and artists; New York is, after all, a crossroads. A case in point: the season's opening salvo, the **Fall for Dance Festival** (New York City Center; Sept. 22-Oct. 3), features a *bulería* (a joyful, fast-paced solo), performed by the spectacular young flamenco star Juan Tomás de la Molía, a proponent of the raucous side of the Spanish dance. It also includes an appearance by Miami City Ballet, in Alexei Ratmansky's "Roses from the South," a playful and tender new ballet set to Strauss waltzes.

On a grander scale, the **Australian Ballet** returns for the first time since 2012 (City Center; Oct. 8-11), now under the direction of the former American Ballet Theatre star David Hallberg. The company performs "Oscar," an ambitious new ballet inspired by the life, writings, and notorious trial of the Irish wit Oscar Wilde. The choreography is by Christopher Wheeldon, of "MJ" fame. It is, notably, one of a very few story ballets to delve into the subject of same-sex love.

In "The Surge" (Joyce Theatre; Sept. 16-27), the choreographer **Sonya Tayeh** creates a different kind of homage—to an artist, Sinéad O'Connor, whom many of us associate with the angst of our teen-age years. Rather than tell O'Connor's story, Tayeh channels the singer's ferocious energy through the bodies of her ten dancers, all women over forty, all with something to say.

A visit by the Bangalore-based company **Nrityagram**—which brings "Khankhana" to the Joyce (Oct. 13-18)—is always an event, because the troupe's resident choreographer and leader, Surupa Sen, is one of the greatest interpreters of the Indian classical dance Odissi. Sen's choreography extends this ancient form, adding partnering and dynamic range; her dancers, all trained under her tutelage, move with extraordinary clarity and incisiveness.

Since the former company member Michael Novak took over the **Paul Taylor Dance Company,** he has expanded the repertory beyond Taylor, both by adding new works and by digging into the archives. At the David H. Koch Theatre (Nov. 4-22), the group performs "Tensile Involvement" (1953), an example of the latter, an experiment in electronica and physical abstraction by the now seldom-performed Alwin Nikolais. The piece is like a trippy cat's cradle, in which the dancers become colorful parts of a machine. The company is also bringing back "Byzantium" (1984), one of Taylor's nightmare pieces—an evocation of the folly and decadence of man, past and present.

—*Marina Harss*

CONTEMPORARY MUSIC

The Many Facets of Pop and Rock

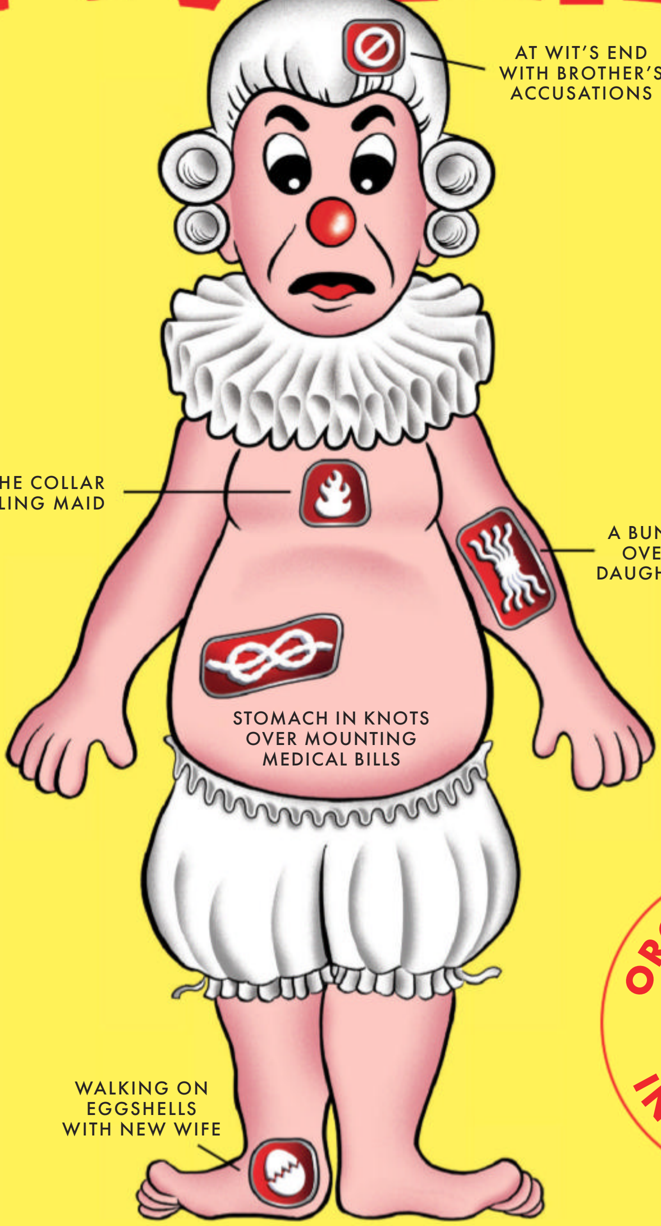
Pop music has come to encompass so many different things in the social-media age, and you can see all the ways its definition has expanded in the past decade across the fall slate of contemporary-music shows. If pop is a genre with its own sound, that sound can be heard in the tunes of **Robyn,** the Swedish dance-floor sensation (Barclays Center; Sept. 4, 10). If pop is an amalgamation of all things popular, its many contours are reflected in the songs of the French singer **Lolo Zouaï,** who fiddles with sonic and language boundaries (Blue Note Jazz Club; Sept. 9), and in those of the Pasadena performer **Tinashe,** who has been at the center of indie-pop's genre-bending efforts since 2014 (Brooklyn Paramount; Oct. 24). If pop is an idea that picks apart what it means to be cool and influential, look no further than **Charli XCX** (Barclays Center; Sept. 14-15) and **Phoebe Bridgers** (Barclays Center; Sept. 24-26), artists who have parlayed relatively fringe styles and indie stardom into arena-filling cult followings.

But pop is bigger than even those confines. The realms of roots music and Americana are also rife with pop possibilities. The singer-songwriter **Brandi Carlile** eases through reflective folk rock that offers the personal as an extension of activism (Forest Hills Stadium; Sept. 26). The New Zealand artist **Aldous Harding** makes indie folk feel like a one-woman revue, her magnificent new album, "Train on the Island," greatly adding to her cast of characters (Brooklyn Steel; Sept. 12). At Radio City Music Hall, **Alabama Shakes** returns with soulful Southern rock and its first album in eleven years, "I Must Be Dreaming" (Sept. 2), and **Shaboozey,** the country-rap fusionist whose single "A Bar Song (Tipsy)" stormed the charts in 2024, goes full outlaw (Oct. 3).

Hip-hop tilted the pop axis at the turn of the millennium and remains an arbiter of its taste. The trap melodicist **Don Toliver** leans into his star turn at Barclays Center (Sept. 6), and the punk-trap trailblazer **Rico Nasty** returns

Hypochondriacal. And a little maniacal.

THE IMAGINARY INVALID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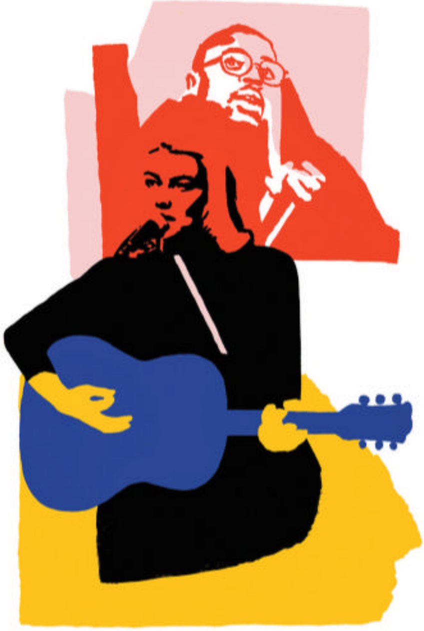
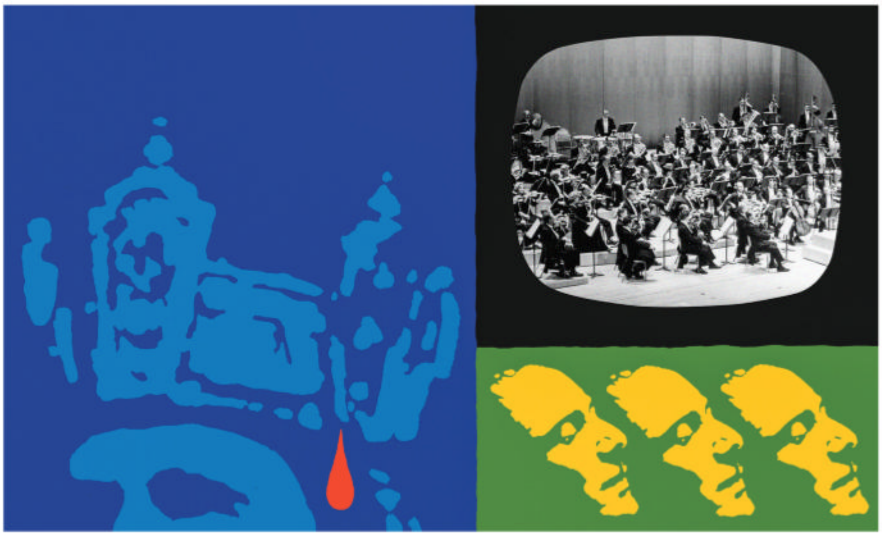
to form at Knockdown Center, on the back of her mosh-ready new album, "RX" (Sept. 13). Brooklyn Paramount welcomes **EsDeeKid**, a phenom of the U.K. underground scene (Sept. 15), and **ScHoolboy Q**, who has been reinventing gangsta rap since the early twenty-tens (Oct. 3). The same could be said of **Vince Staples** (Brooklyn Steel; Oct. 27); his latest record, "Cry Baby," takes him to a more explicitly political place, while also pushing into blues rock and post-punk.

At another point on the pop spectrum, artists are toying with the conception of rock music in the popular imagination. At Warsaw, on Sept. 15-16, the noise icon **Kim Gordon** extends the reaches of the punk tradition. The virtual British group **Gorillaz** tests the boundaries of what a band is, as it has been for decades (Madison Square Garden; Sept. 29). At the same venue, the grungy, lo-fi pop smelter **beabadoobee** and the shoegaze revivalist **Wisp** team up for a show that puts young people at the center of those lost arts (Oct. 5), and the avant-R. & B. mold-breaker **Kelela** blends those sounds with her œuvre to create a new avatar at Brooklyn Paramount (Oct. 9-10). Then, on Oct. 16, at the New York Society for Ethical Culture, Phil Elverum performs as **Mount Eerie**, with poignant meditations on life and death perfectly reflecting autumn melancholy.

—*Sheldon Pearce*





CLASSICAL MUSIC

Reich's World, Murder at the Met

Time is the great mystery of music: songs and sounds are always ephemeral, yet they exist beyond their moments. The pioneering minimalist **Steve Reich** has done as much as any composer to bend time's arrow into a circle, but not even he can make it stand still: he turns ninety in October, and his home town is taking note. At the Park Avenue Armory, Reich's eponymous ensemble is joined by **Alarm Will Sound** for a staged, expanded version of his kaleidoscopic "Music for 18 Musicians" (Oct. 14-18). At National Sawdust, **Erik Hall** presents his immersive take on the same piece, paired with the more florid but equally hypnotic "Canto Ostinato," by Simeon ten Holt (Sept. 26). **Sō Percussion** brings "Drumming," in which Reich weaves pulsating rhythmic nets using techniques he learned from Ewe drummers and Balinese gamelan players, to 92NY (Oct. 28). **Bryce Dessner** and **Nico Muhly** are among the performers in an all-Reich program at Carnegie Hall (Oct. 22) which includes two U.S. premières. And **Trinity Church** anchors three lunchtime choral concerts (Sept. 23, Sept. 30, Oct. 7) around Reich's settings of Hebrew Biblical texts ("Tehillim," "Traveler's Prayer," "Jacob's Ladder"), before a dedicated evening on Oct. 7.

It's knives out at the Metropolitan Opera, where three tragic heroines sing of what drove them to murder: ambition (Verdi's **"Macbeth,"** opening Sept. 22, with Lise Davidsen and Quinn Kelsey as the treacherous Scots), jealousy (Cherubini's **"Medea,"** opening Oct. 30, with Sonya Yoncheva in the title role), and desperation (Puccini's **"Tosca,"** which begins another season-spanning run on Nov. 1). Expect a more quixotic take on tragedy, and fewer stabbings, from Missy Mazzoli's long-anticipated setting of George Saunders's novel **"Lincoln in the Bardo"** (world première Oct. 19).

Opening night at the **Chamber Music Society** stays on theme with an all-American program that includes a concert version of the "Psycho" score (Oct. 13). At the Miller Theatre, a different sort of tension animates the violinist **Jennifer Koh's** assault on Bach's complete sonatas and partitas (Sept. 24). **Eleanor Alberga,** a subtle British Jamaican composer, will be at the keyboard to present her new piano quintet (National Sawdust; Oct. 30). Meanwhile, the **New York Philharmonic** celebrates having **Gustavo Dudamel** all to itself—*finally*, no sharing with Los Angeles—with several new commissions. Zosha Di Castri's "Invisible House" and Tania León's "Imágenes mestizas" première alongside the fifth symphonies of Prokofiev and Mahler, respectively (Sept. 16-19; Sept. 25-27, 29). And, for its contribution to the spooky season, the orchestra will play the soundtrack to Jordan Peele's "Get Out," while the movie screens (Oct. 28-31).

—*Fergus McIntosh*

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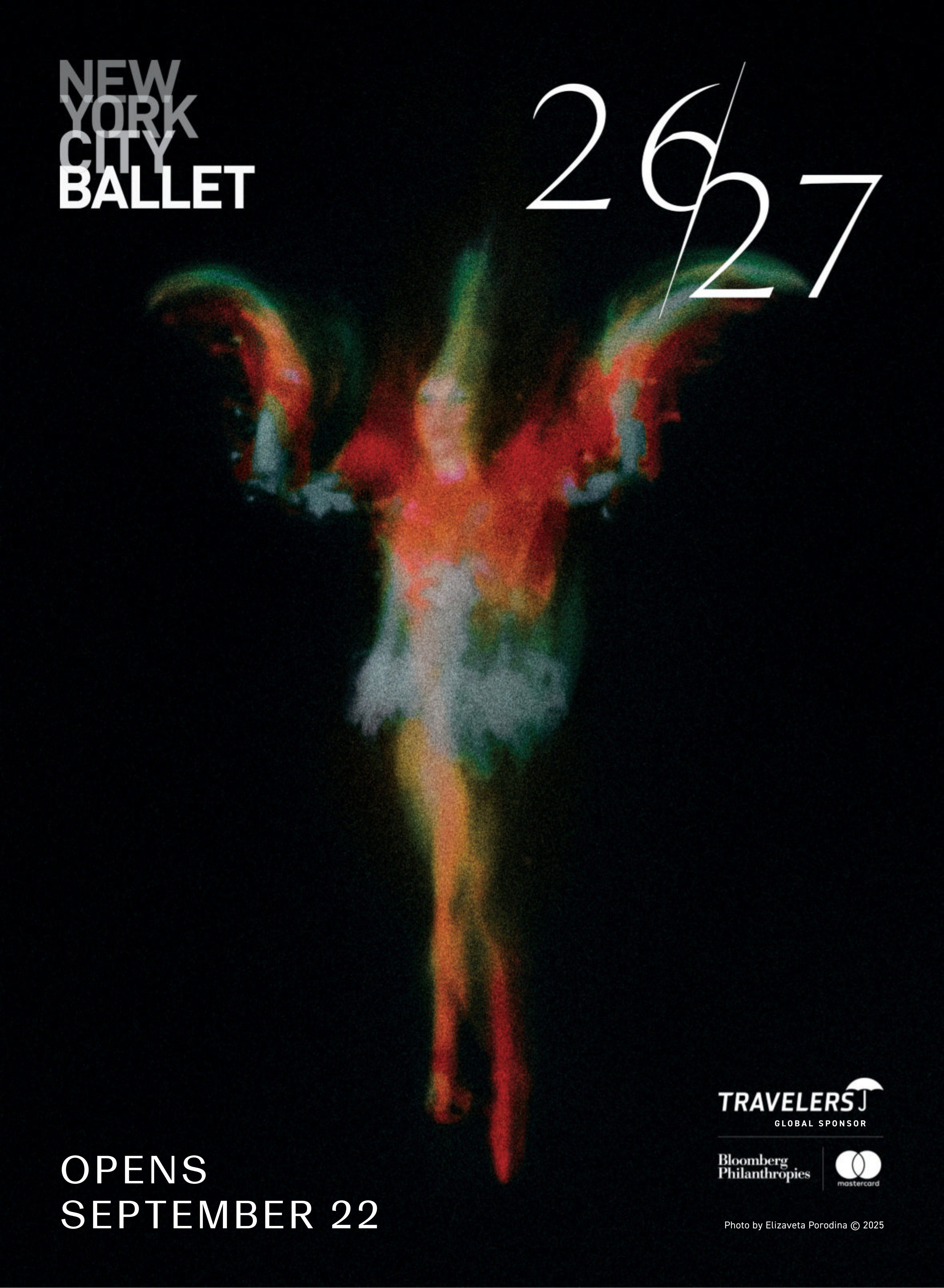
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THE NEW YORKER

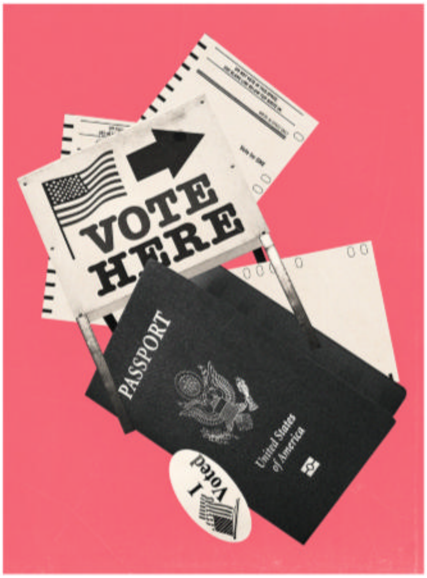
THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
ELECTION GAMES

Donald Trump has never been noted for his vote-counting skills. In January, 2021, during his infamous call to Georgia's secretary of state looking to find eleven thousand seven hundred and eighty more votes in the Presidential election he'd just lost, he claimed that "fifties of thousands" of his potential supporters had been turned away at the polls, and that five thousand dead people had voted. He later called Joe Biden's win "statistically impossible," and his own subsequent victory, in 2024, "the biggest mandate in 129 years." (None of those claims are true.) In a speech in July, in which he demanded that the Senate pass the Safeguard American Voter Eligibility Act—also known as the SAVE America Act—he complained that there were "tens of millions of ballots floating aimlessly through the mail," as if the U.S. Postal Service were a road to nowhere. Later in the month, he said, referring to Senator John Thune, the Majority Leader, "He's got the votes" to pass the bill. "That must be a different form of math," Thune told CNN.

Thune's count was more accurate than Trump's: the Senate adjourned without voting on the SAVE America Act. But what has been a season of tumult in Trump's efforts to change the parameters of voting in the United States is not over; the midterms are fast approaching, and the bill will be back in some form in September. And it is only one part of a package that includes an executive order, threats of prosecution, and street-level intimidation, all in an effort to make Trump's math work.

Four Republican senators—Lisa Murkowski, Susan Collins, Thom Tillis, and Mitch McConnell—have opposed the bill, which would mandate that Americans produce "documentary proof" of citizenship that many cannot easily obtain in order to register to vote, and that they generally must do so in person. Murkowski, who represents Alaska, wrote in an op-ed for the *Wall Street Journal* that just registering would require some of her constituents to take a Bering Air flight from an island to the mainland, perhaps only to find—if they are older or Native Alaskan or married women who have changed their name—that their documents are not proof enough. Voters would also need to present a photo I.D. on Election Day or send a copy of their I.D. with mail-in ballots, leading to privacy concerns.



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Acts of Congress, however, are not Trump's only tool, or necessarily his preferred one. Solicitor General D. John Sauer has filed an emergency petition with the Supreme Court, asking that the President be allowed to implement an executive order, regarding mail-in voting, that lower courts have enjoined ahead of the midterms. The order is an absolute mess; if it were ever fully put into effect, it would not only disenfranchise many eligible citizens but break the mail-in-voting system and possibly the Postal Service. Basically, it mandates a multidirectional game of Ping-Pong, in which, by sixty days before an election, the Department of Homeland Security would send each state a list of people who it believes are citizens, based on a grab bag of databases, and the states would give the Postal Service lists of people they believe are eligible for mail-in voting. The Postal Service would then, in some yet to be defined way, craft a "Mail-in and Absentee Participation List." If you are not on *that* list, the Postal Service would not be allowed to deliver your ballot. Unsurprisingly, one lower court has said that the order appears to be an unconstitutional use of Presidential power.

There are multiple ironies here. As Murkowski's objections indicate, some of the Americans most affected by these rules would be rural voters, who tend to lean Republican. It's estimated that about half of Americans hold valid passports—the easiest proof of citizenship—but the number is far higher in blue New York (more than seventy per cent) than it is in red West Virginia (about twenty per cent). And traditionally it has been Republicans who have opposed “federalizing” election practices, preferring to leave states to their own devices.

Trump is also poisoning the process at a moment when the system for casting votes in the United States really does need shoring up. Concerns about foreign (or domestic) interference, especially in the age of A.I., are not fanciful. Each state has its own system, and many are rickety or verging on obsolescence. According to the Brennan Center, some local election managers get spare parts for voting machines on eBay. And the historic wave of immigration in the past decade probably does narrow the margin for error. In New Jersey, sixty-six hundred people who had stated, when applying for licenses or I.D.s with the Motor Vehicle Commission, that they were non-citizens were mistakenly registered to vote, and about four hundred of them did so. The state and an outside software contractor are at odds about who was at fault, but the lapse is symptomatic of a system under pressure.

The most distinctive characteristic of the Trump approach to election security, though, is how punitive it is. After Trump’s speech in July, the D.H.S. Secretary, Markwayne Mullin, said, “If you are an illegal, or you are voting illegally, we will hunt you down, we will find you, and we will prosecute you.” Would that mean federal agents stationed around polling places—election suppression with a badge? The Administration has sued dozens of states to obtain voter information, and the new executive order includes a threat to prosecute anyone “aiding and abetting” the distribution or even the printing of a ballot that a non-citizen might cast. Election workers, or eligible citizens with imperfect paperwork, might not want to take the risk.

So what is Trump up to? His proposals would not yield security, but they could lead to disorder, or the perception of it, which he could make use of in the wake of a close election. He may also be looking for excuses should the midterms deliver a rebuke to his Presidency. (That said, Trump himself won’t be on the ballot, reducing his incentive to cheat; it’s his own numbers he cares about most.) And the President may want to further stoke divisions between citizens and non-citizens.

Last month, on Truth Social, Trump told Thune that in order to pass the SAVE America Act he should do away with the filibuster, with its threshold of sixty votes, adding that, if the Republicans lose control of the Senate, “the Dumocrats will do it on day one.” (He has asked his followers whether “Dumbocrat” or “Dumocrat” is the better name.) “Day one” may be close, and Trump knows it.

—*Amy Davidson Sorkin*

GIVEAWAY DEPT.
PIN-STRIPED PROMO

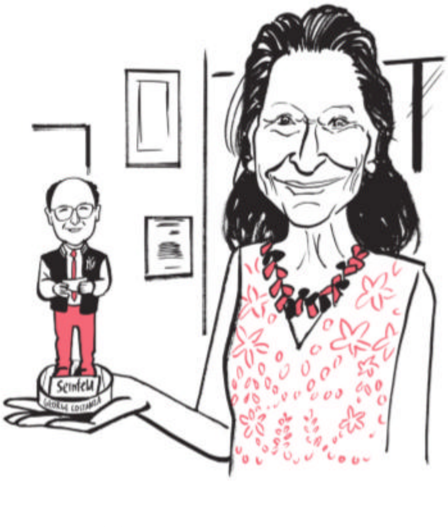
Debbie Tymon, the New York Yankees’ senior vice-president of marketing, has an office at the Stadium, situated behind home plate, with a window that overlooks the concourse where fans line up to get in on game days. She can thus witness the fruits of her labor when the line forms earlier than usual for such promotional events as Yankees Bucket Hat Night or Yankees Soccer Jersey Night, when the first clutch of fans—typically eighteen thousand of them—are handed freebies as they enter.

The gates might open at five for a seven-o’clock first pitch. “But, for the hottest items, they’ll start lining up at one in the afternoon, twelve-thirty even,” Tymon said the other day. The Stadium has four main entry gates, where the lines can overlap and even snake back toward the subway exits. This sounds like hell if you’re a baseball fan, but it’s heaven for Tymon, who is pleased to play a part in boosting attendance. “It really is gratifying,” she said.

Her workspace is cheerfully cluttered with Yankees memorabilia—pretty much what a twelve-year-old might fantasize a Yankees executive’s office to look like. On the desk sat what is likely this season’s most anticipated giveaway: a bobblehead likeness of George Costanza, the “Seinfeld” character played by Jason Alexander, which will be handed out at a game against the Houston Astros this month. Some of this summer’s giveaways have nothing to do with the Yankees—Hello Kitty and “KPop Demon Hunters” bobbleheads, for example. But not the Costanza bobblehead: the character worked for the Yankees across several seasons as “the assistant to the travelling secretary,” making this giveaway, now an annual event, the rare promotion with genuine synergy. Last year’s Costanza day was a sensation. As fans exited the Stadium, lurking entrepreneurs offered a hundred dollars for the figurines; today, sellers ask for as much as a thousand bucks on eBay.

This year’s Costanza bobblehead wears a Yankees jacket and holds a calzone—a tribute to the 1996 episode in which George’s employment becomes contingent on procuring daily eggplant calzones for the team’s real-life owner, the late George Steinbrenner. (The character is seen only from behind on the show and was voiced by the series’ co-creator Larry David.) At her desk, Tymon hoisted the pleasingly solid, seven-inch figurine, and pointed out the carefully painted bits of pepperoni and eggplant in the calzone. “Look at the quality!” she said. “Compare this”—she held up a chintzy-looking pin that another major-league team had given out to its fans—“to *this*”—the bobblehead.

Tymon is in her forty-second season with the Yankees, having begun her pin-striped tenure in the nineteen-eighties,



Debbie Tymon

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as the director of group- and season-ticket sales. An elegant, slender woman, she was wearing a white dress with a chunky turquoise necklace and could have passed for a gallerist in Santa Fe or somewhere on the coast of Maine. She was joined by her colleague Craig Cartmell, the team's senior associate director of marketing and promotions, who was dressed more predictably, in a Yankees polo shirt and jeans.

Cartmell, who worked with the vender who made the Costanza bobblehead, explained the multistep process. First, a deal had to be struck with Warner Bros., which controls the rights to the show. Then Jason Alexander had to sign off on the concept. (Jerry Seinfeld, a prominent Mets fan, had no say in the matter, although Tymon said that he's a fan of the bobbleheads.) Warner Bros. then worked with the manufacturer to design the head, assuming responsibility for the actor's likeness, while the Yankees took charge of the body. It's worth noting that the contours of the bobblehead's bald spot map precisely onto Alexander's in the calzone episode—again, attention to detail.

The giveaway business has changed during Tymon's tenure. "I remember trying to convince Mr. Steinbrenner that the Beanie Baby was a good promotion," she said. "Mr. Steinbrenner said, 'We don't give away little stuffed animals.'" That was not the Yankee Way. But Tymon knew that Beanie Babies might expand the team's fan base, by luring young families. She gave Steinbrenner a Beanie Baby catalogue and asked him to show it to his grandchildren. "Let them pick the first Beanie Baby," she suggested. "So he took it home to Tampa, called me the next day, and said, 'Valentino'"—a white bear with a red heart—"and hung up." History was made. Not only was it a successful promotion but David Wells pitched the fifteenth perfect game in baseball history that day: May 17, 1998. A Yankees Valentino now resides in Cooperstown, at the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Not all giveaways pan out. Tymon mentioned the team had considered a bobblehead promotion involving a turkey character. "But we felt there could be negative connotations depending on at what point in the season you gave it out," Tymon noted. "After a June swoon, you don't want to give away a turkey head."

—*Bruce Handy*

MEMBERS ONLY DEPT.
ROCKAWAY REVIVAL

Say what you will about Robert Moses, but the man had an eye for bathhouses. For Jones Beach, he insisted on expensive brick for his "people's palaces" because it complemented the sand. His follow-up, a giant Art Deco complex in Jacob Riis Park, in the Rockaways, introduced generous amenities to Depression-era New Yorkers: a solarium, an open-air dance floor, a skating rink. After the city ceded control of Riis to the federal government, in the nineteen-seventies, the monument to public recreation was shuttered. Since then, it has lain dormant, hovering over the People's Beach like a ruin.

This month, the Jacob Riis Bathhouse is reopening as the Rockaway Ocean Club. The project began with the firm behind Brooklyn Bazaar, which once threw warehouse parties in Williamsburg and now runs some boardwalk concessions. Overhauling the historic building required eighty-eight million dollars in investment, along with some upscaling of the original mission. A portion of the complex is now a private club, with members-only access to a new pool, a co-working space, and other perks. Annual memberships start at two thousand dollars, not including a hefty joining fee. The club offers discounts for locals and people under thirty. To some on the peninsula, the rescue was a betrayal.

"It seems like the government is selling off our public property," Janet Fash, a Rockaway resident and the city's first female chief lifeguard, said the other day. The club had reached out to Fash, who is sixty-six, about hosting a reading of her new memoir, "Lifeguard: A Love Story." A few days before the soft opening, a tour was arranged for Fash and her husband, Bob.

Ursula Damani, a co-owner of the club, was leading the tour and had been trying to get ahead of the criticism. "People keep talking about how the bathhouse was free, it was public," she said near the entrance. "But actually it wasn't free." She stopped at some original limestone ticket windows, where beachgoers once paid a quarter for a locker or fifty cents for a dressing room.

Fash, who had on a turquoise bucket hat and a floral-print dress, read from a plaque, dated 1932: "Erected by the city of New York for the recreation of its citizens."

"This has guided everything in our project," Damani said. They passed through a courtyard into a restaurant that will serve Mediterranean cuisine. Bob, who wore a polo with the logo of an F.D.N.Y. motorcycle club, asked about the dress code. "We just had this conversation about whether we're requiring shoes," Damani said. "We have to, because of insurance."

When the government took over Riis, the east wing of the crumbling bathhouse was given over to the National Park Service lifeguards. "People joked the chief lifeguard used it like it was his garage," Fash said. She recalled going to parties in the asbestos-filled building as a teen-ager: "All the Rockaway girls would come. One night there was nitrous. Everyone was talking like a duck."

After a recent boardwalk heckling incident, Damani said she had been consoled by Fash's memoir, which traces her long battle against corruption and sexism in the lifeguard union. "I learned that if I give the shit back to them, they respect me," Damani said.

On the second floor, a construction crew worked on finishing twenty-eight hotel rooms, set to open next summer. A private lounge, clad in original aquamarine tiles, faced the sea. The shoreline below has been fenced off for more than two years, pending the removal of old wood pilings. "They have not maintained the park," Fash said. "It doesn't make sense to me." Damani blamed bureaucracy, which she said had also delayed the club's opening: "It took us six years to sign the lease. I've probably dealt with every acronym in the federal government." She was less concerned about a boycott by a coalition representing the beach's long-standing queer community, which has called the club a "flimsy privatization scheme." "Once we open and

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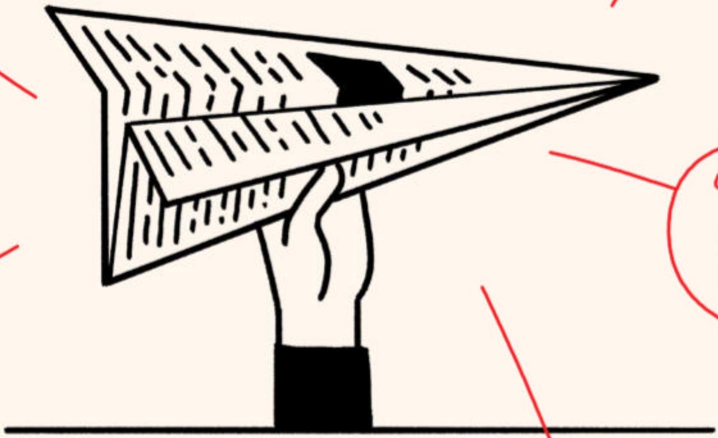
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they see *this*," she said. "I'm not too worried about it."

Next stop was a roof terrace, with views of the Manhattan skyline. Damani said, "We made sure the public has access to the best part of the building." She had envisioned something like an Italian beach club. "They don't overprice things," she said. "It's very democratic." Fash signed a copy of her book and agreed to be in touch about the possible reading.

Away from the guide, the couple compared notes. "It makes me happy to have such a beautiful building coming back to life," Fash said. "Am I going to be shelling out money? I don't think so. But I already live at the ocean." Bob said that he might join. His wife looked surprised.

"I love having all-access," he said. "I'll bring you for dinner once in a while."

—*Jake Offenhartz*

WORK-AROUND DEPT.

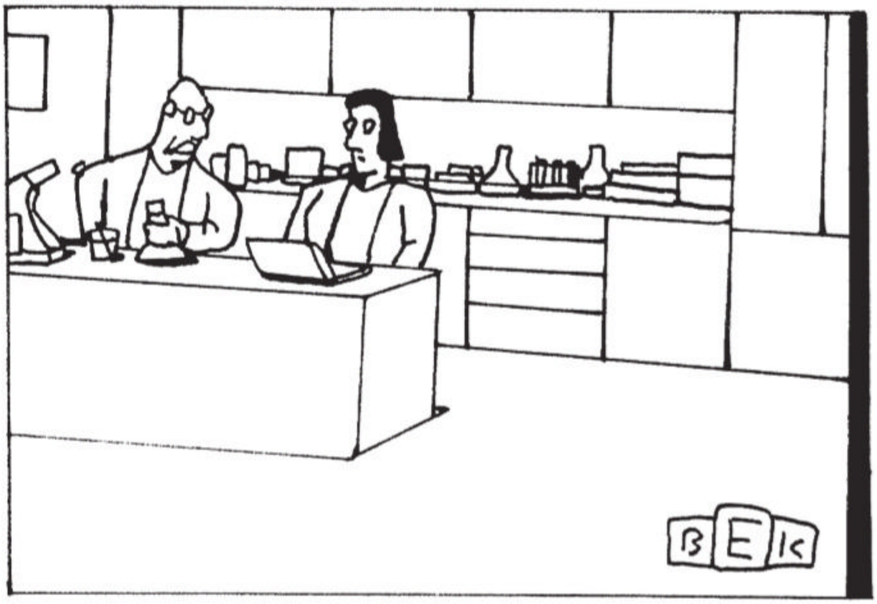
HIGH ART

"Show, don't tell" is an old adage about writing. Could the same advice apply when it comes to marketing cannabis? "You cannot post weed on Instagram," Rachel Bell, the content director of Gotham, a New York purveyor of marijuana products, said the other day. She was standing in the rotunda of the Guggenheim, wearing a gray skirt and a green T-shirt. "Even if it's legal in your state, Meta doesn't care—they're gonna take it down."

Major buzzkill. But what about documenting the buzz itself? That turns out to be a gray area that can elude the algorithm, as Bell found when she hit a vape and visited the 2023 Frieze Art Fair with a cameraman. "I'm stoned," she says in a video from the expedition, ambling past a Rothko-esque canvas. "All right, that's gorge. *Loving* that." A trip to the American Museum of Natural History, enhanced by a ten-milligram "cheer" gummy, followed. "Sorry, guys, you're dead," Bell says in front of a pair of taxidermy antelopes. "Owls are freaky-deaky creatures," she observes at another vitrine.

Views of the series—titled "Hi, I'm High"—accrued, reaching more than a million for Bell's trip to the New York Botanical Garden. ("That one's called Miracle on the Hudson," she says, reading the label on a rosebush. "Like the guy who landed the plane?") So did visitors to Gotham's four stores.

Joanne Wilson, Gotham's founder, is pleased with the results. "Rachel is so charming and likable that just seeing her experience and be curious about the world under the influence makes you want to get involved," she said.



"We spent all this time trying to save people's lives when we could have been coming up with better fro-yo."

Shooting the videos is not always a cinch. "The past two episodes, we were told to stop filming—which is, like, my worst fear," Bell said. "It's hard to pivot when you're not sober." On the way to the Guggenheim, she'd drunk a can of THC-infused lemonade; her cameraman, Gianluca Randazzo, abstained. "I'm, like, the designated driver," he said.

She walked up to the ticket counter and put down her credit card. Declined. "Ugh. O.K., let's try the other one," she said, fishing through her wallet. "Somebody didn't do her expense report on time."

Once inside, Bell and Randazzo took the elevator to the top. "This is a good spot to talk about what you've consumed," Randazzo said.

"On the ledge here?" Bell asked. She leaned over. "Jesus, that will make you feel vertiginous!" She paused, hearing the pitter-patter of little feet approaching. "One of our biggest obstacles," she said. "Kids can't be in cannabis content."

"It was a nightmare at the A.K.C. dog show," Randazzo said. "So many children."

Bell was ready to start exploring. "Is that art or a couch?" she asked, considering a row of gray cushions. "I see butt prints." She wandered ahead and found some more. "Confirmed that those are, in fact, couches, not art, because why would there be more than one?"

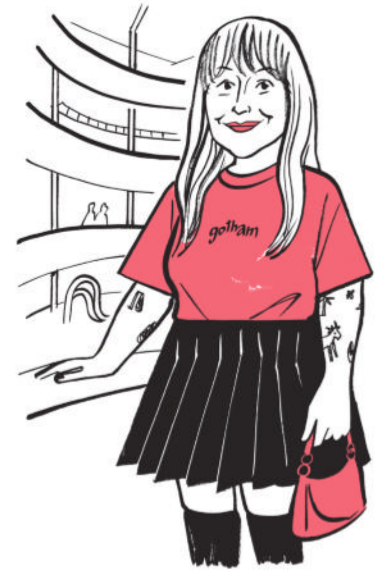
They passed a long black cylinder ("Foam roller," Bell said. A glyph by Carol Bove) and a chain-link net ("Netting," also Bove). "I heard, like, fifty-eight per cent of people who come here come for the building, not the art," she said.

They stopped at an assemblage of driftwood, seashells, and peacock feathers, titled "The Foamy Saliva of a Horse," another Bove. "I don't want to sound ungrateful," Bell said, "but I'd like to see some paintings. Is there more to the museum than just the roundy part?" She stumbled across some pictures in gilt frames. "Oh, hell yeah," she said. "Modigliani, let's go." She read aloud the label below a Pierre Bonnard painting of a woman at a table: " 'The painter's oft-depicted wife.' That's what I like to see. Your wife *should* be depicted."

"Do you want to sit and talk about how you feel?" Randazzo asked.

"Very wasteful, the design," Bell concluded. "Not enough pictures."

Bell, who is thirty-three, came to her



Rachel Bell

job in a sideways fashion. A poet and novelist, she schooled herself in Instagram to promote her work. "All of the small presses that I published with had, like, no money, so marketing was on me," she said. If she could sell poetry through social media, she thought, she could probably sell other things. When Wilson found her, Bell was running social media for a real-estate app.

"People are always, like, 'Wow, your job is amazing,'" Bell said. "'You just get high and do stuff.' Like, yeah, but then I have to reply to e-mails. Don't get too excited."

—*Sheila Yasmin Marikar*

UP IN THE AIR
WHERE THERE'S SMOKE

New Jersey's fire season technically ended in May, and the state's forest-fire service has since dispatched its firefighters to the west: currently, they are in Minnesota, Colorado, Montana, Idaho, and Washington. But to Bill Donnelly, the service's warden, New Jersey's fire season, like North America's, can feel unending. "As of lately, it's just been three-sixty-five," he said the other day, as he climbed twelve flights of stairs in New Jersey's new fire tower, its first since 1948. Donnelly, who is fifty-seven and has a graying crewcut, started in the service as a fire-tower observer in 1989, when he was twenty. Back then, the hourly weather check involved trekking up and down a hundred-foot tower. (Today, the data is in a cabin up top.) "Let me tell you, I had buns of steel back in the day," he said.

The new tower, one of twenty-one in the state, is in Jackson Township. It replaced one evicted by a new housing development. The day Donnelly climbed, it was ninety degrees, with dry conditions and a stiff breeze. "This is the Cadillac," he said, of the taut structure. A catwalk at the top commanded a twenty-mile view of blue sky, a bowl of green below. A wildfire, already observed, was under control on Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, a nearby military base.

Justin Sauers, the tower's operator, opened a door in the cabin to greet Donnelly, releasing an arctic blast. "It's about thirty degrees cooler in here," he said.

The centerpiece of the cabin's six-by-six-foot room is the alidade, a sighting device attached to a table-size compass rose. The operator aligns the sight with smoke on the horizon, notes the angle, then drags a string across a topographical map hanging from the room's ceiling to take a reading. The map shows other towers close by, each radiating a string that is fastened to the map when other towers radio in readings. "The more strings, the more precise you can get on where the fire is," Sauers said.

"Gotta go old school—more dependable," Donnelly said. He was scanning the horizon, a long-standing habit.

"A lot of people don't even know New Jersey has fire towers," Sauers said. "I think after Jones Road last year"—a fire that burned fifteen thousand acres in twenty days—"people started realizing how many towers we still use. It is the best technology."

Sauers, who wore a beige fire-service uniform and surfer sunglasses, grabbed his radio transmitter to start the daily weather broadcast, but Donnelly interrupted. "There's a smoke problem right there," he said, pointing. "We got a fire!"

"Cory, Cory," Sauers said into his radio, addressing the operator of a nearby tower. "Look up towards me."

The radio crackled. "What do you got?" Cory van den Berg said.

"Dark column coming up, my forty-eight. You have it?"

Van den Berg said, "The only column I see is coming off the base."

Sauers turned to Donnelly. "Billy, call Deale." That would be Deale Carey, the section warden.

"Where am I sending him?" Donnelly asked. "How many degrees?"

"Forty-eight."

Donnelly radioed. "Hey, Deale, we're picking up smoke at forty-eight degrees, about two and a half miles, along the edge of the river. You know Sixty Acre?" (A condo association.) "That's a good place to start."

After beginning as a tower operator, Donnelly spent decades in the field, fighting forest fires locally and out West and training out-of-state teams. "Montana was here this year," he said. "They were blown away—like, holy shit, you guys have some big fires." He also worked the canine fire-investigation unit; once, a bloodhound located a suspected arsonist's father, hiding behind a screen door. "Guy's telling me there's no way his kid was outside and lit the fire," Donnelly said. "And then the dog came right up the steps and . . . bloosh! I was, like, 'Well, my dog seems to think so.'"

Sauers grew up nearby—his father is a part-time firefighter—but only got into tower work recently. "We had the big fire in Lakewood on March 14th of 2021," he said. "My dad was there, and he suffered a medical emergency, and the way the forest-fire service came together to support my family through it—I was, like, this is what I want to do."

Donnelly had raced up to Lakewood from a training exercise that day—the fire burned a hundred and seventy acres, forcing the evacuation of hundreds of families—to discover that Sauers's father had been kept alive by a police defibrillator until an ambulance arrived. "His father got really knocked out," Donnelly said. "But he came back."

"Just yesterday I got to dispatch him," Sauers said.

Deale radioed in, having pinpointed a homeowner with a fire in his yard. The warden would now move in. Deale reported himself available. "B9 is clear," Deale said, using his service number.

"Copy that," Sauers said. "Clear and available."

—*Robert Sullivan*

DISPATCHES

BIG DUMB GLUTTONOUS FUN

On the road to celebrate the ups and downs of America's Semiquincentennial.

BY RACHEL MONROE

Was it possible to have a genuinely good, patriotic time this Semiquincentennial summer? I was determined to find out. A decade ago, Congress set up a bipartisan commission, America250, and asked it to "plan, encourage, develop, and coordinate the commemoration of the history of the United States leading up to the 250th anniversary of the founding of the United States." But the group became riven by infighting and lawsuits. When Donald Trump began his second term as President, he formed his own task force, Freedom 250, which siphoned off much of America250's allocated funding. Donors seeking to contribute to the bipartisan celebrations were reportedly given Freedom 250's routing and account numbers instead. With its diminished bankroll, America250 sponsored a chaotic suite of commemorative activities, including a startup competition, a trivia contest about "iconic American achievements," a nationwide pickleball challenge, and a Bitcoin conference, called Code + Country, in Las Vegas.

Few of Trump's celebrations—a Freedom 250-branded U.F.C. event on the White House lawn and a "national Jubilee" of Christian prayer, among others—appealed to me. The giant Independence Day fireworks show in Washington, D.C., sounded like my kind of spectacle, but then the President started referring to it as a Trump rally. The Great American State Fair seemed like the most promising option left. I live in Texas, and I pictured something like our state fair—big, dumb, gluttonous fun—but on the National Mall. After the opening day, in late June, it immediately became clear that the fair was "great" in the Trumpian sense of the word, which is to say, not great at all. There were no barns where solemn Future Farmers of America in pressed jeans cradled pristine lambs, or petting zoos, or ring-toss games where you could win a stuffed Pikachu the size of an F.F.A. sheep. There were no deep-fried charcuterie boards or corn-dog-and-Hot Cheetos sushi or even funnel cakes. There was a hundred-and-ten-foot Ferris wheel, which was fine, although the one at the Texas fair is nearly twice as tall.

Before I flew to Washington, I was plagued with the feeling that a dark cloud was encroaching on the world. This was not a portent, it turned out, but a retinal detachment. An ophthalmologist injected an air bubble into my eye and zapped the hole shut with a laser. As I left the office, he told me to "avoid trauma."

Fortunately, little at the fair was lively enough to traumatize. Much of the event consisted of booths representing all fifty states, plus several territories and the District of Columbia. They were mostly paid for by state tourism boards and staffed by earnest young people. In the absence of obvious sources of amusement,

Patriot Night at the hundred-and-forty-seventh edition of the annual Mandan Rodeo Days, in North Dakota.

PHOTOGRAPH BY LEWIS ABLEIDINGER

visitors hopped among booths in feverish pursuit of swag—key chains, stickers, sunglasses. Fairgoers passed the word along: Michigan had mini cereal boxes, West Virginia had prestamped postcards, Puerto Rico was out of tote bags. A line formed outside the U.S. Forest Service tent. "I could be handing out turnips and people would want 'em," a man dispensing lip balm and bookmarks muttered. Some visitors seemed to see enjoying themselves as a form of patriotic duty. "Tell *The New Yorker* that we're happy to be here," a woman in a MAGA hat said. Her favorite attractions? West Virginia's postcards and the Fox News broadcast area. "They have the white sofa and everything," she said. "They're also giving out free water, and I think that's amazing."

Free stuff wasn't sufficient to keep an ambient sense of dread at bay, however. "It is beautiful," a dimpled young man at the Utah booth said when I complimented his state. "Unfortunately, it's on fire right now." At least ten states did not send official delegations, citing the cost of participation, scheduling issues, or the partisan tenor of the event. At the North Carolina booth, whose display was sponsored in part by a Nascar team, a visitor, his shoulders hunched in anger, asked why the video monitors in the booth originally included images of the Confederate flag. (They had since been removed.) "We were invited to be here to showcase the resiliency of North Carolina," a staffer repeated stiffly. In the Faith & Family pavilion, the Museum of the Bible gave away fans, a Pentecostal preacher promoted anti-vax literature, and a cozy reading nook featured material such as "My First Board Book: The Second Amendment." By the time I reached Iowa's booth—whose list of items you can get on a stick at the Iowa State Fair (pork chop, smoothie, pecan pie) made me long for Des Moines—I was heat-struck and weary, and I wondered whether the fair was actually a brilliant ploy to spur domestic tourism, by making everywhere else in the U.S. seem better than here.

In the evening, after the heat broke, I made my way to the American Heartland Arena, at the eastern end of the Mall, where a small rodeo was under way. The bleachers were packed, and for the first time all day the air hummed with genuine enthusiasm. The announcer gave an abbreviated and pointedly inclusive history of rodeo—vaqueros and Native riders, cowboys and cowgirls—and then a woman with a pageant smile and a spangled outfit entered the narrow, dirt-floored corral. She stood astride two horses, one foot on each of their backs. The horses circled the ring at a swift trot, passing close enough that I could see the rider's thigh muscles tremble with effort. "If we had more space, she'd go at full speed," the announcer said. Instead, she left the arena, smiling and waving. The announcer directed our attention to a large screen playing a video about the history of the lasso. People began thumbing at their phones again. The free pen I'd been given at the Moms for America exhibit, hours earlier, had somehow already run out of ink. Like many Americans before me, I looked at the world around me and realized that it was played out. It was time for me to head west.

Medora, North Dakota, has been called "the best little town in the West" and "North Dakota's most historic town." Throughout the eighteen-eighties, when the area was still known as the Dakota Territory, Theodore Roosevelt spent extended spells there, cowboying and investing in ranchland. "In this country of hills and plateaus, the romance of my life began," he later said. Medora—which has a hundred and twenty-one full-time residents, according to the latest census—comes alive in the summer. On a typical day this July, around four Roosevelt impersonators were roaming the streets, identifiable by their mustaches, stout bellies, and dispensing of homespun wisdom. Many of the town's bars, restaurants, and hotels have names referencing "T.R.," as the twenty-sixth President is known, with proprietary familiarity, in Medora.

The town gives the impression of being draped in a kind of perma-bunting, and it goes all out for the Fourth of July: a Teddy Roosevelt brunch is followed by a sparkler-filled parade down Main Street to the town square. This year, the town expected huge crowds to come celebrate America's two hundred and fiftieth, which coincided with the opening of the town's Theodore Roosevelt Presidential Library. The library, a four-hundred-and-fifty-million-dollar rammed-earth building, was envisioned as an architectural embodiment of Roosevelt's conservation legacy, and people had arranged their trips to see it years in advance. What better place to indulge in some old-fashioned patriotic razzmatazz?

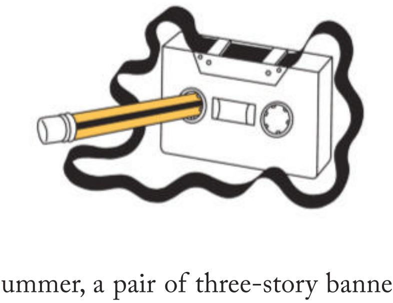
After I booked my flight to North Dakota, I learned that Trump had the same idea. The library's grand opening was now a Freedom 250 event, and Trump planned to make a speech after the ribbon-cutting, on July 1st. When I arrived in Medora, rental cars were sold out and broad-shouldered MAGA boys in too-tight pants were swaggering down the sidewalk, three abreast. The high point of my visit, I had imagined, would be the "Medora Musical," a patriotic song-and-dance revue, dating from the nineteen-sixties, filled with men in cowboy hats and women in ruffled skirts making corny jokes, then bursting into soaring, irony-free harmonies. Performances take place at the Burning Hills Amphitheatre, a nearly three-thousand-person outdoor arena with dramatic views of the Badlands; at a pivotal moment, the stage set slides open and horses gallop onstage. I am a soft touch, particularly for a small-town show, and was looking forward to crying. But the performance was cancelled—word around town was that crews had to reinforce the amphitheatre's stage to bear the weight of a bulletproof barrier for the President to speak behind.

Many Badlands towns are depopulated and unpicturesque, worn down by drought and the boom-and-bust cycle of oil-and-gas extraction. But Medora is more prosperous; in lieu of dollar stores, there is relentless outlaw kitsch. In 1986, Harold Schafer, the North Dakota entrepreneur behind Mr. Bubble, established the Theodore Roosevelt Medora Foundation, which now functions as a kind of nonprofit hospitality conglomerate, operating four hotels, a campground, the Bully Pulpit Golf Course, TR's Tavern, a pizza place, an ice-cream parlor, a family resort, a horse stable, and a half-dozen other businesses. You could spend a long weekend in Medora and, without realizing it, patronize only foundation entities. The workforce is largely international and seasonal; employees live in dorms and eat at a workers' cafeteria, as if Medora were a company town whose primary product is the Medora experience. (Not everyone is on board. In a cluttered store not owned by the foundation, I saw a guestbook with a message in shaky handwriting: "thank you to all our patrons since 2007 for helping small business owners succeed when they are trying so hard to push us out and take complete control.") Medora sometimes feels like a strange, cheerful dream about America. Twice in two days, I found myself stranded without a ride on a butte above town, once in pouring rain; on both occasions, the friendly stranger who offered me a lift turned out to be a Roosevelt.

The story you most often hear around town is that a twenty-five-year-old Theodore Roosevelt travelled west after his mother and his wife died on the same day, of different causes. (The new library displays his journal, in which that day is marked with a large black "X" and the sentence "The light has gone out of my life.") Here, the wealthy and asthmatic young politician, bolstered by time spent outside among manly men, grew strong enough to meet his destiny. But Roosevelt's first visit to the Dakota Territory actually took place a year earlier, in 1883, when he embarked on a hunting trip, dressed like "a regular cowboy dandy," as he wrote to his sister, in a buckskin suit, a silk neckerchief, and alligator-hide boots. The expedition did not go as planned. The Wild West was even then a myth receding into a hazy, heroic past. In place of herds of bison thundering across the prairie, there were piles of bones a story high and as much as a hundred feet long. It took Roosevelt nine days to kill a bison; within a year, there would be only around three hundred and twenty-five left south of Canada. The Northern Pacific Railway had recently been completed, and the violent displacement of the region's Native populations had cleared the path for large-scale cattle operations and wheat farms controlled by absentee landowners—Rockefellers, Vanderbilts, Whitneys, and a smattering of British dukes and earls. A few decades later, after Roosevelt, as President, opened the nation's first game preserve, in Oklahoma's Wichita Mountains, he had to stock it with bison imported from the Bronx Zoo.

On a bright morning in Medora, I met Dan Bram, a policy analyst and a T.R. enthusiast from D.C. In 2022, Bram created a profile on the dating app Hinge that said he was looking for "a +1 to the Teddy Roosevelt Presidential Library opening in the North Dakota Badlands." He matched with Rachel Coleman, whose profile noted that one of the few states she had yet to visit was North Dakota. They began dating, and she was startled to discover that he had a picture of Roosevelt hanging above his bed; when they eventually moved in together, she asked him to consolidate his collection of paraphernalia into the bathroom, which is now T.R.-themed. They married in 2025. "Everybody assumed I was going to talk about him in my vows," Bram said. He refrained, but his friends worked a few mentions into their toasts. In Medora, he and Coleman wore custom T-shirts featuring a drawing of Mt. Rushmore with the non-Roosevelt faces replaced by those of their dog and their friends' dogs.

Bram had worked for Elizabeth Warren, and he told me that his stint with her deepened his appreciation of Roosevelt's role as an anti-monopolist. More recently, a different politician—another wealthy New Yorker with a populist touch and imperial ambitions—has been trying to identify himself with Roosevelt. The assassination attempt on Trump in Butler, Pennsylvania, emphasized the parallels. Here was a candidate who got shot—as Roosevelt was, in 1912, by a man who'd been instructed to do so in a dream by the vengeful ghost of William McKinley—and kept on campaigning. Last summer, a pair of three-story banners reading "American Workers FIRST" appeared on the Department of Labor building, in D.C. One featured the face of T.R., the other that of D.J.T.



In 2024, Trump won the highest vote share of any Presidential candidate in North Dakota since Dwight D. Eisenhower, and, despite his abysmal approval ratings nationwide, he still has plenty of fans in the state. On the day of his appearance in Medora, the crowds awaiting him were magnanimous and forbearing, as they have been at every MAGA event I've attended. (One of the pleasures of tribalism is how nicely you get to treat others inside the tribe.) We rode buses up to the Burning Hills Amphitheatre, where the air was hazy with heat. Nearby, in front of a private audience at the library, Trump praised Roosevelt as a man who led "a freaking wild life," who "didn't want to listen to his doctor," who "didn't want to be quiet—he wanted to be great."

I found a seat at the amphitheatre next to a dapper, snowy-haired, retired Houston chiropractor with Presidential-seal cufflinks and a pocket full of George H. W. Bush commemorative coins. He quietly let me know that he had come to Medora to honor Roosevelt, not the current President. "Trump heard about a parade and decided he had to get in front of it," he grumbled. The midday sun was relentless; a woman collapsed and was carried off by E.M.T.s. After several hours of waiting, two dozen men in suspenders and cowboy hats—Rough Rider reënactors—strode onstage as the sound system blasted "Hot Stuff." In any other context, I'd have expected them to start disrobing; instead, they stood stoically as the President shuffled out, thumbs-upping the crowd. He told us that the country had been dying, but now it was the hottest it had ever been. He told us that one of his sons had advised him not to say who got more votes, him or T.R. He told us that D.C. was bracing for triple-digit temperatures on the Fourth of July but that he planned to give "a really long speech" just to show that he could. The E.M.T.s scurried to help another wilting audience member. (Forty-five people at the event required medical assistance for heat-related incidents, according to the Billings County Sheriff's Office.) I thought about how the promise of equality laid out in the Declaration of Independence has always been incompletely fulfilled and how, even so, I missed having a President who paid lip service to it. The chiropractor exited after about twenty minutes; when I left, a half hour later, Trump was still going.

The musical was rescheduled for the following night; I hoped that it would dispel the aftertaste of Trump's brittle, mean-spirited nationalism, although that seemed like a tall order for a theatrical production. At the performance, I ran into the chiropractor again. He sported a seersucker suit and a fresh sunburn. "I *think* I'm still a Republican," he confessed. Dark clouds massed ominously to the south. The cast got through one song—Brooks & Dunn's "Only in America"—before the show was called off, owing to lightning. It was time to drive on.

"Those will look perfect at the bottom of the ocean!"

Trump headed south, to Mt. Rushmore, a monument he's half joked about wanting to get his face onto; I went another way. As I drove east on Interstate 94, the rumpled topography of the Badlands gave way to farmland, and black cows clustered like scatter plots on the flat graph of the prairie. In Mandan, North Dakota, it was Patriot Night at the Dale Pahlke Arena, where the hundred-and-forty-seventh edition of the annual Mandan Rodeo Days was taking place. By the food stands, a soft-spoken man whom everyone was treating with conspicuous deference turned out to be Dale Pahlke himself, the president and C.E.O. of a local bank and a longtime rodeo supporter. "Energy and agriculture are our two biggest things here," he said. "Oil can be good, oil can be fickle, but agriculture's here all the time."

In its early years, I was told, the rodeo was a casual affair sandwiched between baseball games and community cookouts. Nowadays, it's a sanctioned event on the circuit of the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association, the largest organization of its kind in the world. In rodeo circles, the Fourth of July is known as Cowboy Christmas—a reliably lucrative and hectic period during the peak of the competitive season. As with Christmas, the logistical wrangling can outweigh the enjoyment, at least for the cowboys. One competitor spent the weekend driving between Mandan, the Sitting Bull Stampede (in Mobridge, South Dakota), and the Killdeer Mountain Roundup, north of Medora—a circuit of roughly four hundred miles.

The competitors huddled by the bull chutes looked focussed and road-weary, and I didn't have the heart to pester them with questions about America. I flipped through the program, in which the riders had names with the loping cadence of protagonists in cowboy-romance novels: Canyon Bass, Riggen Hughes, Keaton Street, Lane Leeper. Near me, an elderly couple named Dusty and Sandy—"We're dirty," Dusty joked—diligently marked the results of the contests, as if recording a baseball game's box score. A rider named Koby Jacobson, from Haiku, Hawaii, drew Paper Cut, a jet-black bull. When the chute opened, Paper Cut thrashed across the arena until, at the sound of the buzzer, Jacobson launched himself off the animal and staggered away, his chaps flapping. Dusty squinted appraisingly. "Eighty-five," he pronounced. A moment later, the announcer gave the official score: eighty-five. Dusty nodded, satisfied, as Sandy squeezed his arm.

Later that night, Mandan hosted the Prairie Pyro-Musical—explosions accompanied by a soundtrack of patriotic and pop music—which was advertised as the biggest fireworks display in North Dakota's history. Garisson Risner, a co-owner of the pyrotechnics company Pegasus Illuminations and one of the event's coördinators, gave a more measured assessment. "I think it would be safe to say it was the largest fireworks display in North Dakota that night," he said. "There are a lot of Karens in the world when it comes to pyrotechnics, so we try to watch what we claim." Pegasus, which is based in Mott, North Dakota (population six hundred and fifty-three), knows how to put on a show. Last New Year's Eve, the company lit 2.8 million Roman candles in sixty seconds—a Guinness World Record—with the goal of "bringing awareness to the importance of mental health for veterans."

I found a spot in a broad, sloping field, where children engaged in furious lightsabre battles as they awaited the show. A man sitting behind me streamed Trump's Mt. Rushmore speech on his phone, but I could hear only fragments: "Your Second Amendment . . . The menace of Communism in our land . . . Our American ancestors." It was past the scheduled start time, and nothing had yet exploded. Children rampaged across the grass, chanting "U.S.A.! U.S.A.!" in increasingly aggressive tones. Two boys wove between the field's blankets and camp chairs, demanding that people proclaim their love for America.

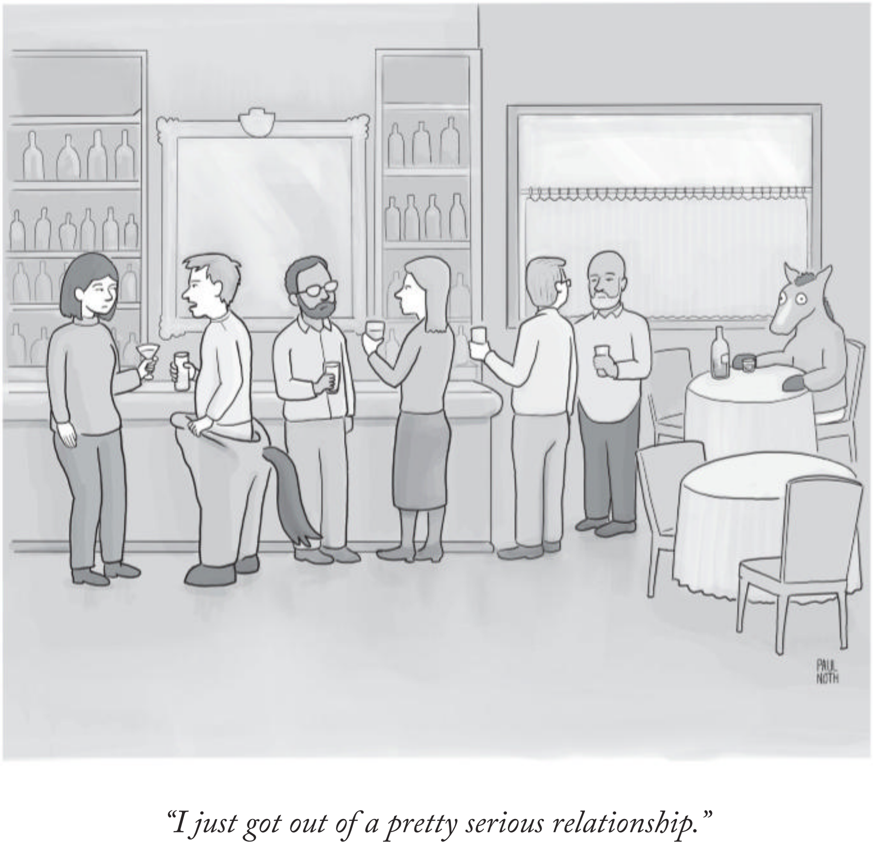
The pyrotechnics world had big expectations for the U.S.'s two hundred and fiftieth, but more than ninety per cent of fireworks are manufactured in China, and Trump's tariffs had put a damper on things, Risner told me. "If we had a customer that had a ten-thousand-dollar show and they upped their budget to fifteen thousand because it was the two hundred and fiftieth, and they asked us, 'So how much bigger of a show can we get?,' you basically had to tell them, 'None,'" he said. Some municipalities shifted to drone shows—swarms of L.E.D. lights that could be programmed to form a bald eagle, then George Washington, then the flag-raising at Iwo Jima. Compared with fireworks, drone shows are cheaper, less alarming to dogs, and more environmentally friendly, but they are as charmless as a QR code.

The Prairie Pyro-Musical happily kept the emphasis on the "pyro." There were comets, fountains, strobe pots. There was an exploding wheel a hundred and thirty-five feet in the air. New to me was the dragon's breath, ground-based mushroom clouds of eyebrow-singeing flame. Sophisticated pyrotechnicians may not find dragon's breath all that impressive ("You take just shy of four hundred fifty gallons of gasoline, you put it in a bunch of metal pipes, and you literally blow it up," Risner explained), but they riled up the crowd. The children grew manic with glee, their lightsabres flailing, their patriotism sublimated into something more primal. "Fireball! *Fireball!*" a girl shrieked.

On Independence Day, on the ceremonial grounds of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate, a tribal nation that spans northeastern South Dakota and a small part of North Dakota, the afternoon heat rose steadily. Darell Decoteau, a voluble man in a Hawaiian shirt, sipped from a large plastic cup of lemonade into which he'd tipped a flavor packet of Sonic Ocean Water, turning the liquid a vibrant blue. It was powwow weekend—*wacipi*, in the Dakota language—and several thousand people had travelled there from Minneapolis and South Texas and Canada to celebrate. There was face painting, a golf tournament, and light-up novelty cups that flashed red, white, and blue. In a long oval at the center of the grounds, women in jingle dresses moved across the grass with light, quick steps to the sound of a steady, thumping drum. *Wacipi* means "they are dancing" in Dakota, Decoteau explained. Above the dancers flapped a ring of American flags, each representing a military veteran from the community who had passed away.

The powwow was more ambivalent than most Fourth of July celebrations. The tribe that would become the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate held its first Fourth of July powwow in the nineteenth century, during a period when the Native nations on the Great Plains were forced onto reservations and their cultures and languages were suppressed. Tribes were discouraged, and later prohibited, from engaging in many ceremonial practices, particularly "heathenish dances," as Henry Teller, the Secretary of the Interior under Chester Arthur, called them. "When we'd sing and dance, everyone would get all worried that it was a war party and all that," Decoteau told me. The tribe, whose treaty with the U.S. established the Lake Traverse Reservation in 1867, was led by a man named Gabriel Renville, who received permission from federal authorities to celebrate the birth of America. There was feasting, dancing, lacrosse, and a competition in which Renville's spotted horse outpaced a white man's racehorse. The ostensibly patriotic event repeated every year, serving as a kind of decoy, an excuse for tribal members to gather and dance. It is by some accounts the second-oldest continually operating powwow in the U.S. The tribe found other outlets for communal gathering, ways of translating its traditions into something palatable to white society. "We became a big rodeo society because we couldn't powwow," Decoteau said. "We're a social people."

Decoteau told me that his parents met on the West Coast, where they had moved in the sixties, the result of a federal program that incentivized Native Americans to leave reservations and settle in urban areas. The program was part of a mid-century campaign that sought assimilation while eroding tribal sovereignty. But Decoteau was brought up by his grandparents, who lived a few miles from the ceremonial grounds; these days, he teaches Dakota culture in local schools and serves on the powwow's planning committee. He gave me a tour of the grounds, stopping to shake hands every ten feet or so—with a man in a Prince hat and a "MAKE AMERICA NATIVE AGAIN" shirt who was promoting a public-art project in Minneapolis, with



"I just got out of a pretty serious relationship."

a woman selling ribbon skirts and handmade silver jewelry, with venders from Guatemala selling knockoff Labubus in Pendleton prints. A couple of kids sprinted by, brandishing plastic machine guns. Decoteau frowned. " 'No guns' is the rule, but one of our venders must have snuck some in," he said.

Asking people about the anniversary of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence felt a little silly, given the context. "Newcomers," one man said tolerantly. "You're here to get the Native perspective on two hundred fifty years of America?" John Heminger, a photographer with a long face and restless energy, asked me. "You mean stolen lands, broken treaties, boarding schools, generational trauma?" Then he gave a wide, disarming grin. There were people around who might have some interesting thoughts about patriotism, Heminger suggested—the Kit Fox Society, a veterans' organization named for a Great Plains warrior group. As Heminger led me over to them, he mentioned that Native Americans serve in the military at a high rate compared with other ethnic groups, and I asked him why he thought that was. "It's that warrior tradition that we have," he said, then paused. "And the extreme poverty."

The Kit Fox members were under a shade structure. Two men who had served in Vietnam sat in mobility devices, dozing; Iraq and Afghanistan veterans chatted as they loaded blanks into magazines in preparation for the Grand Entry that evening. "I was reluctant to join the Army, to be honest. It wasn't that I was scared—it was just because of the history between our tribe and the U.S. Army," an Iraq War veteran named Nicodemus Cody Seaboy told me. "But my grandpa told me that, when we won at Little Bighorn, we captured their flags, and now it's your turn to defend that flag, because that flag belongs to us." The society also planned to hold a welcome-home ceremony that evening on behalf of Matthew Cordell, a tribal member and a logistics officer in the Army Reserve. Cordell had recently returned from a tour in Kuwait, where an Iranian drone attack had killed six soldiers in his unit and injured more than thirty others. The ceremony was meant "to call home our spirit, to alleviate the death and destruction we had to see, so we can leave all that there and come back and live in peace again," Seaboy explained. Cordell, a polite man wearing fatigues and a pained expression, sat nearby. "They're doing something special for me tonight," he told me. "I wasn't ready for it, mentally, but it needs to happen to help me heal, because our unit got messed up pretty good."

I made my way back to the stands to await the ceremony. Decoteau was there, sipping his beautifully unnatural lemonade. The sky darkened suddenly, as if it had been turned down by a dimmer switch, and Decoteau frowned at a weather app on his phone. "Nothing good comes from an east wind out here on the prairie," he said. A storm arrived with pounding ferocity. Minutes later, it passed, the air washed clean in its wake. The drummers picked up a Grand Entry song, and the Kit Fox members stepped onto the grass. I saw that the Vietnam veterans had exchanged their black baseball caps for war bonnets. Then came the welcome-home ceremony. The group moved to the beat in a slow circle, with Cordell at the center. They were joined by family members and by dancers in their jangling skirts until the ceremonial grounds felt charged with noise and purpose. Someone handed Cordell his toddler daughter. She nestled into his chest as he stepped rhythmically in place, the expression on his face unreadable, his feet never slowing. After the ceremony, the dancing and singing continued. The day felt impossibly wide, broad enough to accommodate all the country's contradictions, the grief and disappointment and pride and fellow-feeling and everything else I couldn't name.

The sky was still holding on to a shred of light when I walked to my car, after 10 P.M. I passed a softball field, where a laconic announcer unhurriedly narrated the eleventh and final game of the day. "Peyton here is playing with nine fingernails," I heard him say. In D.C., the President was talking about Communists again, before so many fireworks were shot off that the Mall was blanketed by thick smoke. I got in my car and lowered the windows so I could keep listening to the drums as I drove away. In the waning light, I passed cornfields—knee-high, as prophesied. "Things get hectic at times but things are smooth now," Decoteau texted me, a little while later. "Now we will dance late into the night." ♦

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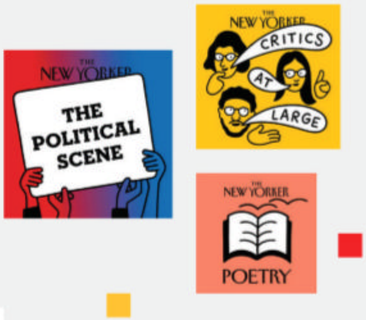

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BY ERIC KLINENBERG

Planners are returning to three ancient forms of cooling: water, soil, and shade.

In late May, Jannik Sinner, the world's top-ranked men's-tennis player, was closing out a dominant second-round performance against Juan Manuel Cerúndolo, ranked fifty-sixth, at Roland Garros. The French Open, as English speakers tend to call it, takes place during a traditionally splendid time of the year, when Parisians delight in the temperate air.

Sinner, a lanky twenty-four-year-old Italian with red hair, sharp elbows, and ground strokes like shotgun blasts, had won thirty consecutive matches and was the overwhelming favorite. After cruising through two sets, he was one game from victory, with a win probability above ninety-nine per cent. Then, as Cerúndolo prepared to serve, Sinner grimaced, took a few gingerly steps, and stretched his apparently cramping legs. They had played for less than two hours, but this May felt like August. Paris lay beneath a heat dome, and the red-clay courts were baking in direct sunlight.

Ordinarily, Sinner attacks with explosive energy, crouching on his long legs before springing upward, his feet leaving the ground after each shot. Now he slapped awkwardly at the ball, his shoes seemingly stuck in the clay. He lost the next two games badly, then complained of possible dehydration and called for a medic. After a nearly ten-minute time-out, play resumed. Sinner hobbled on, grimacing, dizzy, stiff, and weak. He lost the set, then the next two, and so the match. "The heat got to him," an announcer proclaimed, deeming the famously fit Novak Djokovic a new favorite to win the tournament. The next day, Djokovic vomited on the court during the fifth set and lost.

Jakub Menšík, a twenty-year-old Czech who reached the semifinals, fared even worse. After winning a four-hour-and-forty-one-minute match, he collapsed onto the clay, where he writhed with cramps for more than four minutes as medics brought ice. "It's insane to play in this weather," he said, after being taken to the locker room in a wheelchair.

For generations, the French Open has embodied the ideal gateway to the European summer. In 2026, the spectacle of world-class athletes breaking down in sweltering conditions became the latest sign that the Continent's rapid warming is bringing that ideal to an end.

Although climate scientists warned in the nineteen-eighties that extreme heat posed a growing danger, policymakers in Europe didn't come to grips with it until August, 2003, when a heat wave killed more than seventy thousand people. What those officials still failed to plan for was that Europe would warm at a rate more than twice the global average. A number of regional factors explain why. One is the Continent's connection to the rapidly warming Arctic. Retreating snow exposes darker ground that absorbs more sunlight; as soils dry, they're less able to help with cooling the air. Meanwhile, strong winds carry hot air north from Africa, while declining aerosol pollution admits more sunlight, in a process called "brightening." Together, these effects have set the stage for the fierce summers, destructive wildfires, and suffocating heat domes that now threaten Europe's health, culture, and economy.

Historically, heat has evaded crisis-level attention. Unlike camera-ready disasters—hurricanes, earthquakes, tornadoes, floods, fires—blistering temperatures rarely produce images dramatic enough to go viral. The typical victims are old, poor, and socially isolated residents of disadvantaged areas, making heat waves invisible killers of people largely invisible in public life.

In the past five years, however, Europe's heat has become too lethal to ig-

ILLUSTRATION BY MATTEO BERTON

nore: an estimated seventy thousand heat-related deaths in 2022, forty-eight thousand in 2023, and sixty-three thousand in 2024. This June—Western Europe's hottest on record—at least ten thousand excess deaths were recorded as Paris topped a hundred and five degrees Fahrenheit, Bordeaux hit 108.5, and Gascony reached 111.7. The Eiffel Tower and the Louvre closed early, the museum explaining that its building is "not sufficiently adapted to climate change." A nuclear plant in southwestern France shut down a reactor because the river water used to cool it was too warm. Dozens of young people, including a twenty-one-year-old professional footballer, drowned while seeking relief in open water; three French children died in broiling cars. Some Parisians took refuge in air-conditioned hotels.

The fact that rooms were available during Europe's prime vacation season suggests trouble for its nearly three-trillion-dollar tourism industry, a hefty share of the Continent's G.D.P. More visitors are giving up on summer holidays in cities that feel like saunas and booking "coolcations" in Iceland, Norway, or Denmark. In one survey, more than half of travellers said that they had avoided particular destinations because of extreme weather or natural disasters. A 2023 European Commission study forecast "a clear north-south pattern in tourism demand changes" that "becomes more pronounced for higher warming scenarios," signalling growing economic consequences for Madrid, Lisbon, Athens, and Milan.

"Travelling to European cities is about cultural experience," Daniel Scott, a scholar of tourism at the University of Waterloo, in Ontario, told me. "Whether it's Paris, Barcelona, or Rome, you amble around, sightseeing, street shopping, taking a riverboat tour, going to a museum, a restaurant, a café. Most of that time, you're outside." Climate change increasingly turns pleasure trips into exercises in escaping pain. "When I'm in Europe, I always notice how many people crowd under trees and shaded areas," Scott said. "But at some attractions, like the Acropolis, there's no way to avoid the blazing sun. On especially hot days, they've got the Red Cross giving out water, medics pre-positioned because they know many people are going to be in trouble when they come down."

Paris, like the Acropolis, was not built for this weather, and has been slow to adapt. The French are famously wary of air-conditioning, considering it an affront to cultural norms, a threat to architectural beauty, and an accelerant of warming. An Ipsos survey published in June found that seventy-eight per cent of the French regard air-conditioning as "not respectful of the environment." Only some twenty-five per cent of French homes have air-conditioning, compared with around sixty per cent in Italy and eighty-nine per cent in the United States.

The problem is that this summer is only a preview of the treacherous weather that lies ahead. Météo-France projects that France will experience five times as many extreme-heat days by 2050 and ten times as many by 2100. Survivors of the coming climate-changed decades may remember 2026 as mild.

Most European governments, unlike the current American Administration, recognize climate change as a profound threat. More mechanical cooling, through conventional air-conditioning or less carbon-intensive technologies like heat pumps and geothermal systems, seems inevitable, even in France. So do electrification and greater investment in renewable energy. Yet nation-states have moved slowly. It's in cities, where the danger is most urgent, that architects, planners, and officials are racing to lower the temperature of the landscape, inventively redesigning it around three ancient forms of cooling: water, soil, and shade.

This July, I arrived in Milan just as Europe's third heat wave of the summer entered its fiercest stretch, following what meteorologists called an "Omega block": a high-pressure system had trapped hot air from the African deserts over the Continent, blocking cooler currents. The heat posed more than an urban public-health threat. Across Western Europe, it was creating the conditions for a vast wildfire emergency that in late July displaced more than three hundred thousand people in France and Spain and killed a dozen in Almería province.

I had come to meet Stefano Boeri, a Milanese architect and urban planner known for designing buildings, and occasionally whole metropolitan areas, around trees. First, I wanted to see his signature project, Bosco Verticale: two apartment towers, twenty-six and nineteen stories high, whose deep balconies hold enough trees, shrubs, and flowering plants to fill twelve acres of woods, not to mention some twenty species of birds, all of which Boeri considers tenants. I had seen Bosco Verticale in countless photographs and videos, but encountering it at street level was exhilarating and surreal. Squinting up from the muggy sidewalk, I saw the buildings towering like giant redwoods, their leafy, wind-rippled façades startlingly alive.

One of Boeri's assistants arranged for me to visit a compact one-bedroom apartment that Boeri's firm maintains on the ninth floor of the taller tower. Its windows framed the skyline through tangles of dark, leathery holm-oak leaves and, disorientingly, thick tree trunks rooted in enormous planters and secured against storms by vertical cables. I slid open the heavy balcony door. Light filtered through the foliage, and soft gusts carried scents of olive trees, sage, and rosemary. The air was markedly cooler than on the sidewalks below. Though the morning was already approaching ninety degrees, I wanted only to sit there, listening to birdsong as the building, and I, breathed.

That afternoon, Boeri greeted me at his studio, a bright-yellow converted publishing house in a verdant neighborhood near the city center. Casually elegant at sixty-nine, he has silver hair, a warm smile, and a habit of propping his glasses on his forehead. Around him, some sixty-five people hunched over long tables lined with models of new vertical forests. As we walked among them, Boeri told me that he had been fascinated by the symbiosis between people and trees since childhood, when he read Italo Calvino's novel "The Baron in the Trees." In it, a twelve-year-old boy, Cosimo, rebels against his aristocratic family, and the Enlightenment's false divide between nature and culture, by climbing a holm oak and spending his life in the canopy. There, he hunts, harvests, builds a library, falls in love, and writes a declaration of rights for men, women, children, animals, fish, insects, and all vegetation.

Boeri hoped to invent buildings that had this feeling of vitality. He explained, “I wanted to make plausible and possible something that apparently was impossible, to create a new perception—a forest that’s a façade, a building, a hundred and twenty metres tall, that lives and breathes and constantly changes as the seasons change and the trees grow.”

But his reasons for the vertical forests weren’t merely romantic. “Green buildings have a lot of ecological benefits,” he said. “Façades made of minerals absorb the high temperatures, which means the interior gets hotter, and the streets do, too, because the building gives off heat at night. A vertical canopy keeps the interior several degrees cooler, which means it requires less energy. It takes pollution out of the air, because trees eat carbon and dust.”

He added, “Of course, it’s also a habitat. It sustains life.”

Though Bosco Verticale is astonishing from the street, the more enchanting view I saw inside is accessible only to those rich enough to reside there. Boeri, who has thirty vertical forests around the world that are completed or under construction, acknowledges the affordability issue. In his studio, he showed me recent projects designed to spread the benefits of vertical forests more widely, including social housing in Eindhoven, a rehabilitation center in Shenzhen, and an arboreal retrofit in Brussels.

Internationally, Boeri is best known for building upward. But an even more ambitious project of his extends across the ground. Around 2007, he proposed Metrobosco, a seventy-four-thousand-acre greenbelt meant to encircle Milan with hundreds of thousands of trees. “The tree canopy here covers only fifteen per cent of the city,” he said. In Barcelona, the figure is roughly twenty-five per cent; in New York, twenty-three. “We need more trees to clean the air, but we also need more to cool it,” he said. In most modern cities, “shade is one of our most precious resources, and planting trees—lots and lots of trees—is the best way to get more of it.”

A project this ambitious requires substantial government support. Boeri, the son of the acclaimed architect Cini Boeri and a member of an influential Milanese family, had the social capital to launch it. But, after some three hundred thousand trees were planted, the project foundered owing to a shift in political tides.

Bosco Verticale’s success gave Boeri another opening. In 2019, he founded Forestami, a civic organization that is aiming to plant three million trees, one for every resident of metropolitan Milan, by 2030. “We might not get that many,” Boeri conceded. “But we now understand that it’s not the number of trees that matters. It’s the number of leaves and the size of the canopy, the amount of surface shade we can produce.”

The next afternoon, with “real feel” temperatures in the nineties, I travelled to Parco Nord Milano, a twenty-three-hundred-acre urban forest, where Maria Chiara Pastore, Forestami’s scientific director, and Riccardo Gini, its technical director (and the director of Parco Nord), had agreed to show me some fresh canopy. After a long residential-and-commercial stretch, the park, which was established in the nineteen-seventies on a former industrial site, suddenly came into view. There was a vast green recreation zone, where bare-chested cyclists and runners (Gini remarked on the “Parco Nord uniform”) passed by small fountains and ponds. Pastore, in a patterned white-and-red sundress and sandals, mercifully led us from the hot stone parking lot into a small air-conditioned office, where she shared digital maps showing Milan’s uneven distribution of trees.

In the city center, options for adding shade by planting trees are limited. Beyond a few parks and private estates, neighborhoods typically have narrow sidewalks that leave little space for planting. “The reality is, there is not much room left,” Pastore told me. Creating it—by de-paving the streets—inevitably brings the political heat that comes from asking people to cede parking spaces and change driving habits. Still, in four years, Milan has completed more than seventy de-paving projects, mostly small, on blocks where residents pushed for more shade and green space. “People love it,” Pastore said. “It just takes a lot of money, a very long time, and a lot of work to get it done.”

Gini, an agronomist who has overseen the planting of some two hundred thousand trees in Parco Nord in the past quarter century, has the tan skin, strong hands, and hearty disposition that are requisite for the job. After we left the office, Gini drove us through a lush expanse of mature trees in grassy meadows to a patchwork of saplings and shrubs. He crouched to inspect young maples and oaks, some only a few feet high, their trunks a finger’s width. “The big trees come from a nursery in Tuscany where the soil is similar to what we have here,” he explained, pointing out trees that were flourishing and smaller ones that, despite ample irrigation, might not survive. “I used to know which species to get, but climate change is making it difficult. Maybe now we need trees from the south.” Pastore, who’s also a professor at the Politecnico di Milano, has colleagues testing which species will grow best in the new, hotter environment. “There are so many variables,” she said. “More heat. More rain. More drought. Insects. New pathogens. The science is hard.”

The saplings, their bases encased in white plastic shelters, were not yet tall enough to form a canopy, and, after a few minutes in the direct afternoon sun, we were sweating through our clothes. “Let’s go into the air-conditioning,” Gini said, guiding us into a more mature forest with twenty-year-old hornbeams, whose serrated, deeply corrugated leaves looked almost pleated. Immediately, we felt relief. V. Kelly Turner, an environmental planner at U.C.L.A., told me that “a person standing in the shade can feel twenty to forty degrees Celsius cooler than someone who’s standing in the sun just a few feet away.” (Yes, Celsius.) Here, with the thermometer approaching a hundred, the grove of hornbeams turned a Las Vegas summer day into a San Francisco spring.

Planting trees in an established park is the easier part of Forestami’s work. “Now we’re going to show you something more challenging,” Pastore said.

We drove seventeen miles west to Vittuone, where Forestami had partnered with a local coöperative and the municipal government to turn an empty industrial lot surrounded by factories, warehouses, and motorbike shops into a wooded area. I asked Pastore why they'd chosen this site and whether they expected visitors. "Maybe someday," she said. But the trees brought another benefit. "The land won't become another factory, with more carbon emissions and more heat," she said.

There was not an inch of shade in the first vegetation zone we inspected, and the grass, brittle as hay, crunched beneath our feet. "I think the irrigation system is broken," Gini said glumly, pointing to three rows of desiccated wild-cherry saplings. He made a phone call, then marched toward a stand of thriving field maples and poplars, their fluttering leaves glossy in the sun, and beckoned us. The canopy was smaller and thinner than Parco Nord's, but the shade worked its magic, lowering the temperature and delivering a gentle, refreshing breeze.

On my last day in Milan, I grabbed a reflective umbrella I'd packed and walked through the neighborhoods around Bosco Verticale. Like Manhattan's High Line, another influential green-design project, it's a breathtaking work of charismatic megaflora that has seeded both a new crop of urban parks and a luxury ecosystem of designer shops and corporate skyscrapers. But, in the shadows of Milan's runaway development, new forests are growing. Nearby, I found another stretch of green: the Biblioteca degli Alberi—the Library of Trees—a postindustrial sprawl that the city helped turn into a twenty-five-acre public park that opened in 2018, complete with twenty-two circular forests and a hundred and thirty-five thousand plants. A few blocks away, on Via Toce, the city had recently melded two small parks by pedestrianizing and de-paving the busy street between them. A nursery school on the green's edge now has a safe—and, soon, shaded—area for children to play. "We have to get the asphalt and the cars off the streets and return them to plants and people," Boeri said. "It's not just about making Milan a better place to live. It's about making Milan cooler." For Boeri, such projects bring his life's work full circle. In Calvino's novel, young Cosimo remakes his relationship with society by moving into the trees; in Boeri's vision, society remakes its relationship with nature by moving the trees into the city.

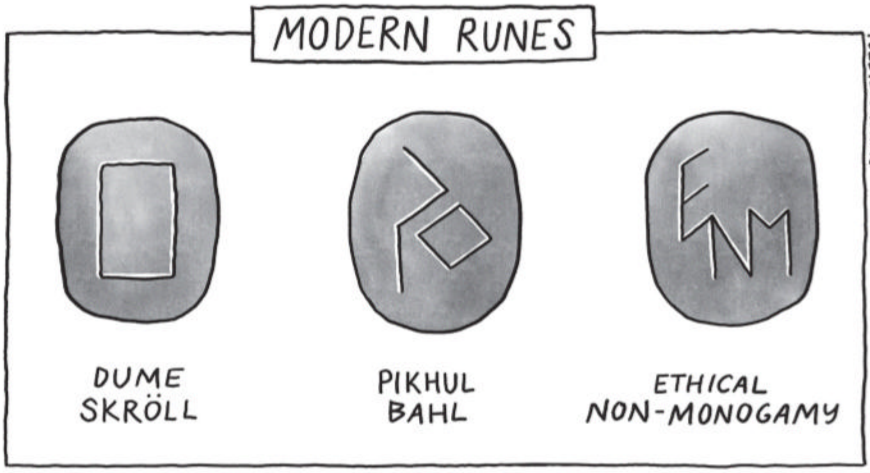
From Milan, I chased the heat to Barcelona, where the dry-bulb temperature was slightly lower but the humidity so persistently high that a friend I'd hoped to meet, and two climate experts I'd planned to interview, had fled. "I can't stop sweating," my friend messaged me, sheepishly. "People have died on the streets. . . . Be careful." Another contact noted that the city had just set a heat record, of a hundred and five degrees, but suggested an upside: perhaps I'd avoid Barcelona's notorious crowds.

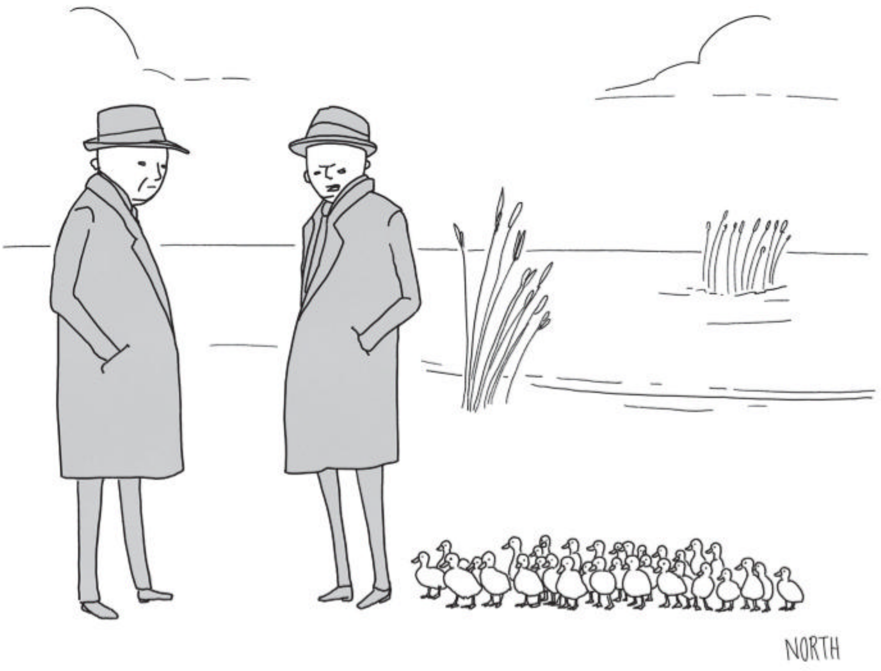
Of all the problems that heat poses for Barcelona, losing some of the hundred and sixty thousand tourists who typically visit each day ranks low on the priority lists of most officials and residents. Some locals have staged protests, chanting "Tourists go home" while targeting visitors with water guns. But tourism employs more than a hundred and sixty thousand people in Barcelona and accounts for around thirteen per cent of its economic output, which explains why, despite concerns that the city gets too many visitors, more than seventy per cent of residents consider tourism beneficial. At midday, when I arrived on La Rambla, the city's most heavily visited and photographed corridor, the street had little shade and surprisingly few people. At La Boqueria market, normally jam-packed at lunchtime, I found my way to a famously busy bar counter and took one of several open seats.

Later, the emptiness became the subject of conversation. "Everybody's making way less money," Diego Penzo Vivas, a veteran tour guide who often works with Americans, told me at a hotel bar near the Plaça de Catalunya. "We're doing fewer tours, and we have fewer people on the tours. I'm on a WhatsApp chat with a bunch of guides, and the stories are crazy. People are getting heat stress, vomiting, asking to go back to the hotel—not just here, all over Europe. The Vatican, Paris, Madrid." Penzo added, "We've had to start doing night tours. Right now, that's the main business I'm getting."

After sundown, I met Andreina Seijas at a tapas bar in Eixample. An urban-planning consultant, she helps cities improve life at night. Seijas, who is forty-one, got her doctorate at Harvard and has lived in seven cities. "What I'm starting to see in Barcelona is people trying to organize their schedules the way they do in Seville or Málaga," she told me. "You stay home with your A.C., close your shutters, take a siesta, and then, after 8 or 9 P.M., you emerge." For visitors, many of whom can afford late-night bars and restaurants, this merely means avoiding La Rambla in the sunshine. For locals, it can be harder. "Barcelona has great social infrastructure, but many parks, libraries, schools, and senior centers are closed late in the evening, and public transit is limited after midnight," Seijas said. "Maybe we need to adopt Dubai's approach toward keeping beaches open twenty-four hours."

"We're definitely changing how we do things," the architect Clara Sola-Morales told me, after we switched cafés





"They imprinted on me when I was dumping the body."

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because the air-conditioning wasn't working in the first one. "You know the *toldos*, those textile canopies they hang over the streets in Seville? There's one planned here now, near the Gothic Quarter, as part of the citywide shadows project." Sola-Morales has long appreciated Seville's cooling strategy, which the city, among the hottest in Europe, adopted generations ago. Transplanted to Barcelona, it signals the city's cultural and ecological transformation. "The heat has changed my practice, too," she said. "In my entire career, I'd never installed air-conditioning until this year. It was always cross-ventilation, fans, outdoor space. Now I have no option. The first one I put in is in my office."

On another muggy day in Barcelona, the air-conditioning worked perfectly in the city-council offices—a far cry from the steamy Metro stations and streets I'd passed through on my way across the Gothic Quarter, where a *toldo* would have been welcome. At the entrance, a security guard handed me a roll of paper towels with a sympathetic look. In meetings with the city's first deputy mayor, Laia Bonet, and its chief architect, Maria Buhigas, I learned that adapting to extreme heat, wildfires, and drought had become a citywide planning effort.

Barcelona was a leader in green urbanism long before the term existed. In 1859, the engineer Ildefons Cerdà submitted an expansion plan that broke with convention by making even residential streets twenty metres wide—five for each sidewalk and ten for carriages. Committed, as the formula goes, to "ruralizing what's urban and urbanizing what's rural," Cerdà called for vegetation throughout the streetscape. Over the next century, residents and city agencies planted thousands of trees, including several forests' worth of London planes, whose enormous branches and broad crowns often meet above the street. Thousands remain, forming green corridors alive with cicadas and birdcalls, reducing traffic noise to a hum. Yet the city's tree cover falls short of what Cerdà envisioned.

In the nineteen-nineties, amid runaway development and increasing traffic and pollution after the 1992 Olympics, there was demand for a return to Cerdà's model: more planting and, radically, fewer cars. In 1993, Barcelona opened its first "superblock," a protected area in El Born where automobile access was highly restricted, giving space to people and plants. Two more followed, in Gràcia, in 2005. Between 2016 and 2023, the mayor Ada Colau expanded the initiative and added four linear parks, known as "green axes," including one almost two miles long. In the renovated areas, newer trees stand beside the heritage London planes, and children kick soccer balls across leafy streets.

Most of Barcelona, however, remains ungraced by superblocks or green axes. A quarter of the city has tree canopy; the rest bakes under the midday sun. Extending the superblocks and parks proved difficult. Fire trucks and ambulances need access to every block, and vegetated surfaces cost far more than asphalt to maintain. Then the warming climate intervened. "From 2021 to 2025, we had a terrible drought here," Bonet said. "At times, we couldn't plant. We couldn't irrigate, across all Catalonia. Just when Barcelona was trying to increase the green space, we lost around seventy-five hundred big trees." Heat and drought were destroying the measures meant to temper them.

Trees were hardly the only casualties. Barcelona has suffered thousands of heat-related deaths and illnesses in recent years, concentrated in poor and immigrant neighborhoods, where air-conditioning and green corridors are scarce. "We know that not everyone in the city experiences heat waves the same way," Bonet said. "So heat is not just an environmental issue. It's a social-justice issue, because it affects older people, children, and low-income households the most." For that reason, she said, "we're prioritizing the areas where vulnerable people are using public space. We're installing two hundred new shade structures around the city, many in playgrounds. We're acclimatizing schools with air-conditioning and paying for it with the tourist tax, so that tourism can help the city adapt."

Since Jaume Collboni became the mayor, in 2023, Barcelona has shifted its heat interventions from superblocks and green corridors toward direct protection for those most at risk. In 2025, it expanded its network of Refugios Climáticos, or Climate Shelters, a program hailed by the World Health Organization which has inspired similar measures from Paris to Rome. More than five hundred libraries, churches, stores, and other public and private spaces now welcome anyone who needs air-conditioning, water, or rest. Some offer free Wi-Fi and rest rooms; all appear on a city app with directions. Another program, Radars, connects isolated elderly residents with neighbors who provide companionship and can check in on them during extreme weather. For children, Barcelona is opening small water parks in neighborhood plazas, with showers and water guns. One sultry Saturday morning, I visited one and found some twenty children drenched and delighted as their parents sat contentedly in the shade.

Buhigas found particular satisfaction in another initiative: turning certain in-between areas—"leftovers," as she calls them—into absorbent green spaces. "There's a variety of them," she explained in a small conference room. "Some are rooftops. Some are abandoned spaces. Some are the spaces in between buildings." The city aims to transform a fifth of Barcelona's leftover land. A colleague projected an image of the Jardins d'Oriol Martorell. "The zoning says that there is a station underground and a green space on top," Buhigas said. "Do you see the green space?" The screen showed a postindustrial hellscape: a vast expanse of rough concrete bordered by a graffiti-covered wall. "I don't. You cannot use this space. It's dead. And not only does it separate two different neighborhoods—it makes both of them hotter by attracting the sun and then releasing all that energy at night."

She went on, "Now look what we're doing." The next slide showed the site transformed into a park, with trees, flowers, permeable pavement, and comfortable seating. "This is going to help connect neighbors, and it's going to help them cool down," Buhigas said. "The other important thing is that it's not very expensive." The plan was to make over fifty acres of land in this way during the next year. "It won't get the attention of a giant park," she said, "but it's going to make a difference."

On my last night in Barcelona, Spain won the World Cup. When the final whistle blew, near midnight, all 1.7 million residents, along with every tourist, seemed to be dancing, sweaty and exhilarated, in the streets. The next morning, sleepless but still buzzing, I met a team from Buhigas's office in the giant park getting that attention. Parc de les Glòries, which opened in 2025, contains, within its twenty-one acres, around a thousand trees, more than fifty thousand plants and shrubs, rain gardens, playgrounds, sports facilities, a water park, and a broad meadow. Its vegetation is irrigated with groundwater unfit to drink but suitable for plants, a luxury in a drought-plagued city. By nine-thirty, people were stretched out on the soft grass, napping, reading, and revelling in the previous night's victory.

I rode an outdoor escalator up into the park through a cactus garden beside the Glòries Metro station. The morning was already steamy, and much of the park remained exposed to the bright Catalonian sun. The designers and I took refuge beneath an immense pergola, nearly ten metres high and seventy metres long. Its white-painted metal columns resembled the legs of a giant caterpillar, and, under the shaded bands of its densely lined shell, the air was suddenly tolerable. Skateboarders shot past. Day campers raced toward the meadow. The site was a former highway interchange, in what had once been a large industrial area, and as we stood there it was possible, briefly, to imagine Barcelona finding a way to cool itself.

Climate adaptation offers no easy victories. Beyond the pergola, we entered a vast playground with soft synthetic terrain and a play "mountain" fitted with long metal slides. Nobody was using it. The designers, after getting so much right, had neglected to shade it. The slides were already hot enough to burn.

Spain is hardly alone in struggling with the details. While I was in Barcelona, Tour de France organizers tried to keep riders from overheating by shortening a difficult hill stage and spraying white paint on the road to lower surface temperatures. But the paint allegedly became slippery in the sun, and three riders, including one known as a master of descents, crashed.

The weather had cooled by the time I reached Paris, where the city's new mayor, Emmanuel Grégoire, was focussed on the summer's three record-setting heat waves, and on those to follow. Moments before our meeting, his press secretary messaged: "Can we do it by bike?" Soon, in the Hôtel de Ville courtyard, Grégoire greeted me in a smart blue suit, brown sunglasses, and jet-black oxfords. Nearby, someone adjusted a bicycle whose seat turned out to be broken. "Take mine," Grégoire said, offering me his green Voltaire e-bike. "It's the best bike in Paris."

Our first stop was the plaza in front of city hall. The previous year, Paris replaced part of its heat-radiating stone esplanade with a dense urban forest, including more than fifty large trees and twenty thousand shrubs and plants. Beneath a honey locust, Grégoire removed his sunglasses and acknowledged that, although climate adaptation had been central to his campaign, he had not expected so many heat waves so soon. "We spent the last twenty years trying to transform the city, saying we need to adapt it to climate change," he said. "Now even people who were in doubt about our plans say, 'Go faster, faster, faster!'"

Grégoire, a forty-eight-year-old Socialist who took office in March, is lean and energetic, with short silver hair, a neatly trimmed beard, and a tendency to race ahead, both on his bicycle and in conversation. He inherited a city undergoing one of Europe's most ambitious ecological transformations. Anne Hidalgo, his predecessor, spent twenty-five years in city government adding bicycle lanes, reducing car traffic, and expanding pedestrian space. Over the past two decades, Paris eliminated tens of thousands of parking spaces, planted more than a hundred and fifty thousand trees, and added thick vegetation to residential and commercial streets. Car traffic fell by more than fifty per cent, bicycle use tripled, and air pollution plummeted. Paris is cleaner, greener, and healthier than it was at the turn of the century—except when it broils.

We cycled to the pedestrianized promenade along the Seine's Right Bank, now a four-mile park abuzz with cyclists, joggers, and strolling tourists. Past a climbing wall, a playground, and a beach-volleyball court, we reached an elevated misting station. A shirtless old man luxuriated in the spray while children ran through it, giggling. "Let's give it a try," Grégoire said. I followed him in.

"There was real social tension during the heat wave," he told me, after our clothes had dried with unsettling speed. "People were nervous, anxious, and angry. Dealing with the heat requires improving the social situation, not only health. That's why we're making parks like this, and opening new swimming areas."

The most famous new Parisian swimming spot is, improbably, the Seine, which opened to Olympic competitors in 2024 and to the public the next year, after France spent $1.5 billion upgrading the region's sewer, stormwater, and wastewater systems. But Grégoire was referring to the Canal Saint-Martin, which runs through crowded residential neighborhoods. Long polluted, it is now clean enough for swimming. During the heat waves, young people who normally gathered beside it began jumping in.

"I saw videos of policemen running after boys and girls to say it's forbidden to swim," he said. "But people needed a way to cool down, and I needed police doing other things. Now, when the water is safe, we have three new swimming areas in the Seine. They're important for heat waves, but they also stimulate joy and happiness. They improve the quality of daily life."

When I asked what Paris could do for those most endangered by the heat, Grégoire's tone grew sombre. He described programs similar to Barcelona's for reaching socially isolated residents, and acknowledged a need for more mechanical cooling for the elderly. Around two-thirds of excess deaths in France's heat wave this June were of people seventy-five or older. Still, he said, another immediate challenge was protecting children. Nearly all Parisian schools lack air-conditioning or adequate ventilation.

"Until this year, our major heat waves happened during summer holidays," he said. "Now we realize that we will have heat waves in May, June, September, and probably, one day, October. Our schools were not built for this weather, so we need a solution, now."

During Hidalgo's second term, the city began transforming its six hundred or so public preschools and elementary schools. It pedestrianized streets outside entrances, removed courtyard asphalt, and added trees and shade structures. These changes improved outdoor spaces but offered little indoor protection during the May and June heat waves. Classrooms baked. Students took consequential exams in dangerous conditions, and young children returned home dehydrated or ill. Officials had to choose between keeping schools open and sending children to equally stifling apartments. Parents demanded answers.

Since June, Grégoire has launched another round of renovations. "First, we have to keep the heat out of the buildings," he explained, "so we're installing shutters to block the sun. Second, we have to improve air circulation. We're putting in ceiling fans and also creating a specific kind of door"—it's heavily perforated—"that helps natural ventilation at night. Third, we are doing more to shade the courtyards, taking out the asphalt, which gets very, very hot, and making them cooler places to play."

Confessing to an American bias, I asked whether it would be easier and safer to install air-conditioning, perhaps using heat pumps. Grégoire said he supports mechanical cooling in some settings but doubts that its immediate classroom benefits would justify the additional energy use. After this summer, many parents may disagree. Marine Le Pen, the far-right politician running for President next year, has proposed a "*grand plan pour la climatisation*," presenting air-conditioning as essential to the health of children and older people. Several progressives and Green Party supporters I met in Paris feared that the issue would boost her campaign.

In 2017, a team of climate scientists warned that, by the second half of the century, France could experience a "mega-heatwave," and that, by century's end, it could see temperatures in excess of a hundred and twenty-two degrees. Alexandre Florentin, a forty-year-old climate-policy engineer who grew up outside Paris, encountered the figure in a science paper and couldn't shake it.

"I love what Mayor Hidalgo did for Paris," he told me as we sat beneath beech and plane trees in the Luxembourg Gardens, one of the city's coolest outdoor spaces. "When I was a kid, the air was terrible. I had respiratory problems, asthma, and attempted treatments. Now we have trees and plants on the sidewalks, fewer cars. It's clean and comfortable, and I bike everywhere. I see bees and butterflies on my block. But in Paris we've been acting as if cutting emissions meant we wouldn't have to adapt. Clearly, that was a mistake."

In 2020, Florentin ran for city council as a Green and joined Hidalgo's coalition. "I suggested to the Greens that we advance an agenda called Paris at 50°C," he recounted. "We needed to change the conversation so it was not just about mitigation targets, like carbon zero by 2050, because that gave people the impression that they have twenty or thirty years to adapt. We knew about the dangerous conditions in schools before this summer, but we didn't do enough." He paused to watch a duck cross behind our bench. "We need to understand that the future is now."

Florentin and a group of colleagues released a report three years ago. "We had two main policy conclusions," he told me. "First, we cannot adapt everything. We cannot take our whole society and put it in a different climate. We cannot entirely change our infrastructure, our buildings, our ecosystems. We don't have enough money or time. That means we have to prioritize, to pinpoint the things we can do better. Second, we cannot adapt to *anything*. There is a hard limit. It could get too hot. I don't want to move to Norway and be a climate refugee, but some people are already talking about leaving the city. There's a real risk that we will lose our habitat. That's what this is about."

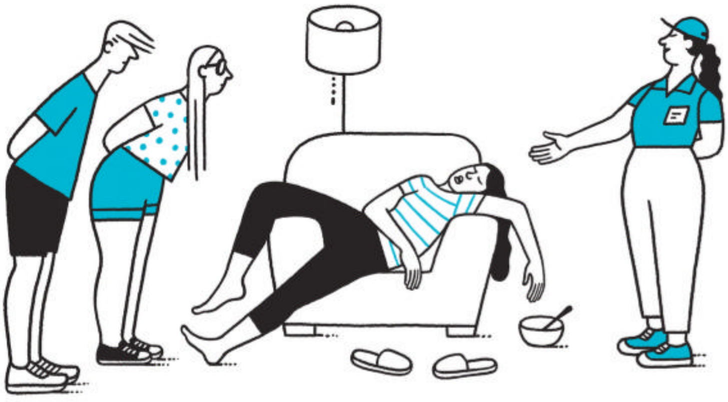
Afterward, Florentin unfolded his bicycle and walked with me toward the Seine, pointing out planters, pedestrianized streets, and the historic zinc rooftops that Paris may eventually have to surrender. The day was clear and bright, but we were both aware that, as we spoke, ferocious wildfires, strong enough to generate an unprecedented pyrocumulonimbus, or "fire cloud," was tearing through France, forcing vast numbers of people from their homes. He asked what promising interventions I had seen elsewhere. I mentioned urban forests, green axes, water parks, shelters, depaved streets.

He took it in, looked at me intently, and asked, "Have you seen any plans for developing the underground?"

I told him I hadn't.

"Well, we should think about it," he said, "because before long we're going to have three days in a row when the temperature is more than forty-five degrees, or a hundred and thirteen degrees Fahrenheit. When that happens, we're all going to need a place to hide." ♦

SHOUTS & MURMURS



ADMISSIONS TOUR: BEING A PERSON

BY JESSICA BACAL

Welcome! Let’s gather so you can all hear me. It’s wonderful that you’re applying to Be a Person—and, specifically, that you’re applying here! My name is Claire, and I’ve been leading these tours all summer.

We’ll start by looking at an example of housing options, so follow me.

This is a “common space” or “living room.” As you can see, it’s super cozy—furry beanbag chairs, low tables, big screen. You might use your living room for hanging with friends, scrolling on your phone, gaming, forcing yourself to do yoga, or just holding sad poses while crying. What’s awesome is that you decide what to do based on your unique goals, and also on your individual level of dread. It fits our core value of “Self-Direction,” which you saw in the PowerPoint earlier.

Moving on to the kitchen: there are also so many ways to personalize the meal plan. You’re going to take ownership of your meals, and the choices are endless: vegan, kosher, halal, vegetarian, gluten-free, keto, paleo, Organic and Sustainable, Totally Unsustainable, Handsome Man TikTok, What Zendaya Eats in a Day, American Girl Doll food. I’m picky, and every day I find something. You’ll have a card, and you just swipe it for groceries, takeout, whatever. There are a bunch of decent restaurants and really something for everyone—I mean, matcha, anyone? If you find yourself up all night, like, scanning thousands of your life mate’s personal e-mails, there’s food available 24/7! The card swipes will show up on a bill you get at the end of every month—there’s always someone who’s, like, “Whaaaaaaaat?”

Now I’m going to tell you about the many options for real-world experience, because they’re right outside your door: getting your car inspected, pretending you don’t see a guy on the street asking for money, or even bringing something to get notarized at a random bank. You’ll also have the chance to place yourself in assorted experiences for which you will receive compensation, which aligns with our core value of “Enrichment.” A lot of people do finance or law, but there are paths in art or writing as well. For people who choose those, we offer a certificate in self-doubt. Anyway, I’d say that no matter what they do, almost everyone here is driven by a deep sense of responsibility to themselves.

Once you’re in a paid experience, there are awesome opportunities to compete with co-workers for stuff like “eye contact from the boss” and “getting invited to the conference in Hawaii.” Promotions and raises do happen, unless you work at a nonprofit like I do, ha ha. There are also people here who never participate in paid experiences but somehow have endless swipes on their card—they don’t self-identify, but you figure it out, because they choose Danish-modern-furniture shopping as one of their real-world experiences.

Let’s keep going. I’ll stop at this room with the bed and answer the question that comes up on every tour: How do people match up to live together? So, you’ll match based on things like—just for example—how much do you party, how neat are you, do you sleep late or get up early, did you vote for Trump, do you want kids, can you stand each other’s families, are you Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, etc. The matching is something you’re going to do on your own, based on those preferences.

Another question I always get: What if you match with someone and it doesn’t work out? So, this happens, and it even happened to me! First of all, there are counsellors you can talk to in order to deal with issues like these, but you can also just switch to a new match or move to a single. That involves some simple paperwork with a lawyer—I actually did it, it was totally not a big deal. It just turned out that we were on different schedules, and he was secretly having this whole sex thing with a chatbot.

Before we close, I want to tell you about why I chose to be here, and—more important—why I stayed. I mean, when I got here, it just felt like I could be myself. Then, once I was here for a little while, I started to wonder: Who is that self? And then, what is a self? Does anyone have one? And does anything matter? But I realized I just needed to keep busy, and so I started leading these tours, and getting involved in other stuff—intramural Quidditch, Mustard-Tasting Club, rubber-duck racing, which is hilarious because they just bob. There might be alcohol involved sometimes, but you didn’t hear that from me! I also started studying computer science so I could install spyware on my ex-life match’s computer. Just kidding—kind of! Anyway, I’ll leave you at the bookstore, so you won’t forget to pick up your “I’m a Person” merch. ♦

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

A REPORTER AT LARGE

THE SCIENTIST'S CHILDREN

A researcher studied a disease in the South Pacific. But his biggest experiment was on the wards he took home.

BY RACHEL AVIV

Every weekday morning, Luwi Ikabala sets up a sewing machine beside piles of sweet potatoes and firewood at the main market in Goroka, in the highlands of Papua New Guinea. Luwi uses a yellow cooking-oil cannister for a chair. On a good day, he makes enough money from hemming sleeves and mending torn clothes to buy a bag of rice. As he waits for customers, he reads novels, copying passages that he likes into his journal. His favorite author is Fyodor Dostoyevsky. He has kept a journal for the past forty years, giving the entries headings such as "Air of freedom," "As I recall her—'the past,'" "About Weakness," and "Who am I?"

Luwi often feels like the "poorest man that ever lived on this planet earth," "a perfect example of a failure." He approaches strangers on the street and asks about their problems, until he sees an opening to "touch them emotionally." He offers advice and then they sometimes give him a little money. One journal entry, headed "Supposed to be somebody," described an encounter with an old friend who'd seen him aimlessly walking the streets of Goroka. The friend didn't understand why Luwi wasn't doing more with his life. But "keeping up with my diary writing," he wrote, made him "at least feel like I am someone—not too big—but someone in my own way."

Luwi, who is fifty-seven years old, took up journal writing at the urging of the Nobel Prize-winning pediatrician and virologist D. Carleton Gajdusek, whom he described as "Father of America." Gajdusek lived in Papua New Guinea while researching kuru, a fatal brain disease that existed only in the country's eastern highlands. Until the nineteen-thirties, the people there remained unknown to the outside world. Luwi and his friends used to crowd around Gajdusek's typewriter, their hands on his shoulders and thighs, as he documented their lives: the insects they ate, their moods, the way they sang to birds. Gajdusek wrote six hundred thousand pages of journals, beginning when he was thirteen and ending weeks before he died, in 2008, at the age of eighty-five. Luwi keeps a copy of the journal in which Gajdusek recorded his birth. "When I was born, Carleton was there to bring me out into the world," Luwi told me.

At times, Luwi feels the urge to write his story "slowly creeping towards my fingertips." After reading "My Secret History," a novel by Paul Theroux, which he'd found in a thrift shop, Luwi got chills. "How I wish to write a story similar to this," he wrote. He wanted to "put all that is in mind into form." Standing over his sewing machine at the market, where I visited him in May, he told me, "My story would start with childhood in a very, very remote area, where an unusual scientist, a man from far, far away, came to live just next to my house." But, as soon as he sits down to write, he finds himself falling asleep.

As Gajdusek entered villages in the highlands of Papua New Guinea, in the late fifties and early sixties, people called out in a high pitch, "White man is coming!" "People, come, come!" The children were jubilant, he wrote in his journal, but women stayed inside, peering out of their huts. Gajdusek ran a lab at the National Institutes of Health focussed on child development and diseases in what he called the "few remaining societies wherein civilization and the major religions of mankind have not yet set their pattern of imprint upon the social fabric in which the child is reared." He gave lollipops to the children and collected blood and urine samples from them. He also administered antibiotics and bandaged wounds. "Although the people are still current warriors and cannibals, they are well 'under control' and very cooperative," he wrote to Joseph Smadel, the associate director of the N.I.H.

One per cent of the Fore people, a community of some fourteen thousand in the eastern highlands, were dying each year of kuru; its name, in the Fore language, means "trembling" or "fear." "It is so astonishing an illness that clinical description can only be read with skepticism," Gajdusek told Smadel. The Fore said that the disease was caused by secret attacks from sorcerers. The victims would shiver, laugh excessively, and jerk their limbs; then they would lose the ability to stand or swallow. Most of them would die within a year. Ronald and Catherine Berndt, the first anthropologists in the Fore region, wondered whether the disease could be a psychosomatic reaction to contact with white people. Australian colonial officers had brought new tools, like steel knives and axes, as well as prohibitions—against armed warfare and cannibalism—to some villages. "Social or cultural events," Ronald Berndt wrote, "may have far-reaching effects on the human organism itself, even to the extent of interfering so drastically with it that it ceases to function."

Gajdusek spent part of every year in the highlands—he described it as Shangri-La, the place where he reached the "heights of human happiness"—and learned the Fore language. Luwi's father and uncle helped build him a house about thirty feet from Luwi's family's hut, in Waieti, a hamlet on a mountainside, more than five thousand feet high, with clouds pooling in the valleys below. Gajdusek's house had braided-bamboo walls and a domed roof, made of thatched cogon grass. On the wall, he taped a picture of John Enders—who'd won the Nobel Prize in 1954, for his work on polio—and a print of Titian's portrait of Ranuccio Farnese, the Pope's grandson, who looks too young for his lavish new cloak. "A chief's son from my people's past," he

As a boy, Luwi moved with Carleton Gajdusek to the U.S. "I am the son of one of the world's greatest scientists," Luwi said.

PHOTOGRAPH BY TAJETTE O'HALLORAN

explained to anyone who came inside.

Gajdusek took care of kuru patients as they died, then persuaded their family members to let him perform autopsies, rewarding them with axes, blankets, and salt. "I did it at 2 A.M., during a howling storm, in a native hut, by lantern light, and sectioned the brain without a brain knife," he wrote Smadel, after one autopsy. He performed some dissections on the same table where he ate his meals. "Some people said, 'We're not supposed to dig up graves—what is he doing?'" Luwi recalled. "And others were saying, 'Oh, he came to look at the disease, let him look at it.'" Luwi's cousin Rebecca Tarubi, whose father had assisted Gajdusek with autopsies, told me, "People would ask, 'Where are the brains?' And we would say, 'Carleton put them in a little bowl and took them to America.'" Luwi's uncle Koiye used to take brain tissue and internal organs to a colonial aid post with an airstrip. Then the body parts were frozen with liquid nitrogen and shipped to the N.I.H., in Bethesda, Maryland.

Luwi and the other children followed Gajdusek wherever he went, and he often photographed them. "One of us would carry his film, another the camera case, and a third the tripod, and then we'd set it up," Luwi said. "I had never seen my face before"—there were no mirrors or reflective metals in his village—"and when Carleton showed us his shots we would all be giggling at the type of faces we were carrying around. It was, 'Oh, I have this kind of forehead, I have these kinds of big eyes.'" In one series of photographs, Luwi stands on one foot and sticks out his tongue; another boy wags his butt; a third boy cups his hands around his eyes as if he, too, is holding a camera. The children, who went barefoot and shirtless, tried on Gajdusek's shoes and socks and examined the texture of his skin. "Me masta now," one child told Gajdusek while dressed in his T-shirt and shorts.

The first time Luwi used a pencil and paper was at the encouragement of Gajdusek, who always brought writing supplies, along with marbles and tennis balls, when he came to Waieti and to other hamlets nearby. He collected hundreds of drawings by children in the eastern highlands who were holding a pencil for the first time in their lives. Having never been exposed to pictures, the children invented their own visual vocabulary. They did not initially compose human figures. Instead, they drew geometric patterns, almost as if " 'weaving' or 'braiding' their way across the paper," Gajdusek wrote. (The drawings are saved at the National Library of Medicine, along with hundreds of thousands of pages of correspondence, journals, and photographs.)

A 2008 HIPSTER LOST IN THE SANDS OF TIME
BLOPER

Gajdusek wrote in his journal almost every day, sometimes trailing off as he fell asleep, transcribing thoughts as they turned to dreams. In his house in Waieti, he kept books by Jean Piaget, John Locke, William Faulkner, Vladimir Nabokov, David Hume, and Henry James. The "constant fingering through the stack of books and magazines I brought here," he noticed, "has produced an aura about the word and writing which is so intense as to be bewitching." The children began demanding lessons in numbers and the alphabet. They sat on the floor of Gajdusek's house, using cargo boxes as desks. "Thus I come to study the 'primitive' and ruin it with my own sophistication!," Gajdusek wrote in his journal. "Damn it!" When presented with blank pages, the children started drawing rows of even marks that mimicked the appearance of letters. In one drawing, a child covered a page with a sketch of a large book with lines of wavy strokes. Below it, four stick figures, arms raised, held the book aloft, like a sacred offering.

Luwi was about four years old when his mother began complaining of headaches and joint pain. "When sitting up, she trembles and is unsteady," Gajdusek wrote in his journal, in 1972. "She claims that there is a roar like 'water' in her ears." She became so weak that Luwi's father hung a rope from a beam in their hut, directly over her bed, to help her pull herself up. Once, Luwi asked her to get him water, and she hit him with a stick, for bothering her. "That's the only act I remember from the woman who gave me life," he told me.

His grandmother had already died of kuru, a disease that mostly afflicted women and children. "They said we have to be fearful, because kuru sorcerers were moving around the community," Luwi said. The sorcerers, it was thought, targeted their victims by stealing bits of their hair, clothes, nails, or feces, and wrapping them in a bundle with leaves. Then they said a spell, beat the bundle with a stick, and left it in muddy ground. As it rotted, the intended victim was supposed to simultaneously deteriorate until death.

Kuru had become so prevalent that in some hamlets there were three men for every woman. For a time, the Fore held almost daily mass meetings to try to ban kuru sorcery. (Other illnesses were also thought to be caused by sorcery, but with a different technique.) "You men are trying to wipe us out," a woman said at a meeting in 1962. A man asked, "Where will you find wives from in the future—if women are completely finished?" There were calls for sorcerers to come forward and repent. In one village, men confessed their acts of sorcery and then put their hands into soapy water, promising that they would never do such things again. But, when kuru deaths continued, there were doubts that the men had told the truth, and the meetings stopped.

Shirley Lindenbaum, an anthropologist working in the region with her husband in the sixties, remembers a neurologist asking, "What do adult women and children of both sexes do that adult men don't do?" She and her husband responded, "They ate the dead." Men generally abstained from human flesh, because it was thought to sap their strength. But Fore women and children ate dead kin as a mourning ritual; it was a way, as one Australian patrol officer put it, to incorporate the dead into themselves and "lessen not only the sorrow, but even the idea, of loss." Lindenbaum and her husband began to suspect that kuru was somehow transmitted through cannibalism.

In the final stage of the disease, people often became incontinent and developed bedsores. "I can still sense the smell," Luwi said. "The human body has a distinct smell that is unbearable." His mother could not accept the idea of people caring for her as she grew increasingly helpless. One day, when she was alone in the house, she made a noose from beaten bark that she used for weaving bags. Lifting herself with the rope dangling over her bed, she hanged herself from the beam.

Luwi recalled being beckoned from the garden. Inside the house, adults were weeping. "My father sat me on his lap, took my right hand, placed it on my heart, and told me, 'Your mother is dead.' That I will always remember."

There were dozens of children in the village without mothers. "I just joined in with the group that was already suffering," Luwi said. A German missionary's wife taught some of the older girls who had lost their parents how to care for the younger children, including infants. "They were just kids, about nine or ten, and they would come to us and act like mothers," Luwi said. His father quickly remarried and had children with his new wife. Luwi forgot what his mother looked like, but people told him that he carried her face. Of her suicide, he wrote in his journal, "I have forgiven her for the courage she took."

"The researchers who came to partake in the kuru saga took not only the brains of the deceased kuru victims," Luwi wrote, years later. "They even took the living children." His uncle Mbaginta'o was the first of sixteen children from the highlands whom Carleton Gajdusek brought home to the United States. "Before Carleton, he had never in his life written a word," Luwi said, of Mbaginta'o. "I think this was a study that Carleton took to understand the functions of the mind."

The project was not conceived formally, but Gajdusek wrote declarations, documenting the transfer of guardianship on Department of Health and Human Services letterhead and had colleagues in his lab serve as witnesses before a notary. A section of his C.V. titled "Children (adopted from Melanesia and Micronesia)" listed thirty-six children whom he raised in the U.S., from the sixties through the nineties. Judith Farquhar, a professor of anthropology at the University of Chicago who'd begun her career working in Gajdusek's lab at the N.I.H., said that one of her responsibilities there was to occasionally take the children grocery shopping and to medical appointments, and to handle paperwork for their school registration and vaccines. She felt that she was assisting with a "noble experiment," though, she added, "it was nothing like a systematic experiment where you'd have a hypothesis and try to prove it." Gajdusek framed his project in philanthropic as well as anthropological terms: he was studying " 'orchids' of human culture—fragile and soon to be extinct, but revealing man and his condition as it may never be seen again!"

Gajdusek selected Mbaginta'o, he explained in a legal declaration, because he seemed the "most intelligent and adaptable to civilized society." Mbaginta'o came from the Anga people, then known as the Kukukuku, who lived in a more remote region than the Fore, surrounded by uninhabited forest and steep mountains. In a college essay that Mbaginta'o wrote years later, edited by Gajdusek, he described the first rite of his initiation into manhood. Awakened by bamboo flutes, he and other boys, some as young as seven, began saying goodbye to the women in their family, whom they wouldn't see again until they grew up. During the next three days, they were struck on the back with sticks, held animal hearts in their mouths, and went to a stream where a blade of cogon grass was stuck up their noses until they bled into the water. On the second day, Mbaginta'o wrote, "the young novices must suck the penises of the older initiated men in order to grow up fast. This homosexual act was to remain a secret of the men, and if it was told to the women, the teller would be killed."

Versions of this initiation practice, which was largely abandoned by the nineties, have been described by anthropologists studying the community. "I have found here in the Western Kukukuku (and I believe that in the past, at least, it was true for the entire Kukukuku) a culture in which pederasty—or pedophilia—has been institutionalized," Gajdusek speculated, in a journal that was typed up by his staff, printed by the N.I.H., and distributed to hundreds of his colleagues.

Not long after his initiation, Mbaginta'o ran away from the Anga people. Both of his parents had died. He began living among the Fore, under the care of Luwi's grandfather, calling Luwi's mother his sister. It was there that he encountered Gajdusek. "He was first white man ever met," he wrote later. "He thought me his western worlds and confuse me in my bush life."

With permission from the Australian colonial government, which controlled Papua New Guinea, Gajdusek and Mbaginta'o left the country together in 1963, making a stop in Guam on the way, to visit an N.I.H. lab. Mbaginta'o didn't know his age, but Gajdusek guessed that he was eleven. In the hallway, they passed a morgue where a white corpse was being loaded into a coffin. "Mbaginta'o stopped short at the sight of the body, and beheld it in such amazement that I too was amazed," Gajdusek wrote in his journal. Gajdusek asked what was wrong, and Mbaginta'o responded, "*Wait man em i dai tu*?"—"The white man, he died, too?" It was only then, confronted with the corpse, Gajdusek wrote, that Mbaginta'o could "suddenly grasp the fact that I, too, belong to a race of mortals."

In America, they were greeted at the airport by Gajdusek's friend Joseph Wegstein, a prominent computer scientist at the National Bureau of Standards. "He was dressed like a boy fresh from a British Colonial office, but instead of stepping out of British Colonial history, he was stepping across 10,000 years of time," Wegstein wrote in a school recommendation. At the airport, Wegstein continued, Mbaginta'o "would not say anything but 'hello,' 'yes,' and 'no.'" In a letter, François Jacob, a French biologist who'd won the Nobel Prize in 1965, wrote that Gajdusek had wanted to see "whether this boy, living in the wild forest, could be accustomed to the modern and sophisticated life."

Mbaginta'o enrolled as a sixth grader at Georgetown Day School. Wegstein tutored him in math three times a week. "His insecurity & anxiety directs him to hard work & quiet withdrawal & diligent attempts to help, to accomplish much, to please!" Gajdusek wrote. Wegstein, who didn't have his own family, prepared meals for Mbaginta'o, bought him clothes, took him sailing, and kept a journal of their time together when Gajdusek was away. After three months in the U.S., Mbaginta'o went with Gajdusek to see the Andrei Tarkovsky film "My Name Is Ivan," about a twelve-year-old orphan who works as a scout during the Second World War and is visited by dreams of his childhood. Mbaginta'o soon decided that he would adopt a new name, easier for Americans to pronounce: from now on, he would be called Ivan.

Ivan learned rapidly for the first year and then seemed to plateau. One of his tutors suggested to Gajdusek, in Ivan's presence, that he "simply might lack the intelligence and ability to learn more." Gajdusek felt, he wrote in his journal, that Ivan "partly understood" the tutor's words, because he immediately became "repressed & tongue-tied." After the conversation, Gajdusek drove down the highway, sobbing. "I pale at the thought of Ivan's fortune," he wrote. "I foresee real tragedy in it for us both." Addressing Ivan in his journal, Gajdusek wrote, "Even your school mates rebelled at seeing you as a guinea pig!!"

Ivan seemed to understand that he had held more power when he was small. After he began to get acne, Gajdusek wrote that Ivan "cuddled up to me and coyly whimpered that he does not want to grow up, that he wants to stay a little boy. He is seriously hurt if I refer to him as an older boy, a young man."

Gajdusek felt increasingly oppressed by the depth of Ivan's needs—his "clueless pouts and 'hurt' expressions." Once, Gajdusek became annoyed that Ivan, studying for a literature exam, hadn't selected the books that he'd recommended. "I thus exploded, struck him several times and rammed home the truth that he is *not* graded in his school and is not the legitimate eighth grader he assumes himself to be," Gajdusek wrote. Another time, when Ivan resisted doing his schoolwork, Gajdusek told him that he was ready to "give up" and send him back home. "He cried so intensely & so pitifully, so completely overcome & with such body wracking sobs that I could not stop him," Gajdusek wrote. "He so lifelessly & wretchedly pleaded & sobbed—only getting out 'No Carleton, No Carleton, Plis, Plis, Plis Carleton, No Carleton, Plis.'" After another fight, Ivan ran off at night, and Gajdusek was so frantic with guilt, he wrote, that at 4:30 A.M. he "walked quietly around the house inspecting the branches of the big trees to see if Ivan was not hanging from one."

One night, Gajdusek took Ivan to see the Japanese film "Kwaidan," a rendering of four supernatural fables. At a restaurant after the screening, Ivan told Gajdusek that he had been seeing people who reminded him of the ghosts in the film. "He was clearly frightened & disturbed & said this spontaneously, complaining that these were not dreams but occurred as visions in the daytime at his desk," Gajdusek wrote. Gajdusek panicked, fearing that "the whole 'experiment' might suddenly disintegrate." The "dreadful spectre of Mbaginta'o hallucinating & having delusions & progressing to fully demented schizophrenia," he wrote, "loomed before me with all its implications . . . all my terrible responsibility." Ivan had confided that in his visions he saw apparitions who were changing physically, growing ugly and old.

Frozen organs from people who had died of kuru were continually shipped to Bethesda: five sets of eyes; seventy-five brain specimens. "How strange to fondle the brain of the infant I so well remember," Gajdusek wrote after the tissues of a one-year-old arrived. Ivan worked in the lab, both as a volunteer and, later, on the N.I.H.'s payroll, and held primates as they were injected with the extracts of kuru victims. Gajdusek had come to the idea of injecting animals after a veterinary pathologist noticed that the brains of kuru patients resembled those of sheep with scrapie, a fatal neurological disease transmitted through exposure to infected tissues. Gajdusek decided to test whether kuru could be infectious, too, a compelling possibility given the Fore's mortuary rituals.

In 1963, Gajdusek's colleague Michael Alpers, an Australian, had performed an autopsy on a child named Kigea. Alpers described her as a "wonderful young girl," who, as her illness progressed, spoke "softly and shyly," eventually only grunting. Liquefied parts of Kigea's brain were put into a chimpanzee named Daisey. Within two years, Daisey became apathetic, and soon her body trembled; then she began huddling, almost catatonic, on a shelf in her cage. Two other injected chimpanzees developed similar symptoms. "Do you think they look as though they had kuru?" Gajdusek, who was in Papua New Guinea, asked Ivan in a letter, in 1965.

Gajdusek and his colleagues con-

Gajdusek in the Solomon Islands, around 1963. He later won a Nobel Prize for his research into kuru, a fatal disease.

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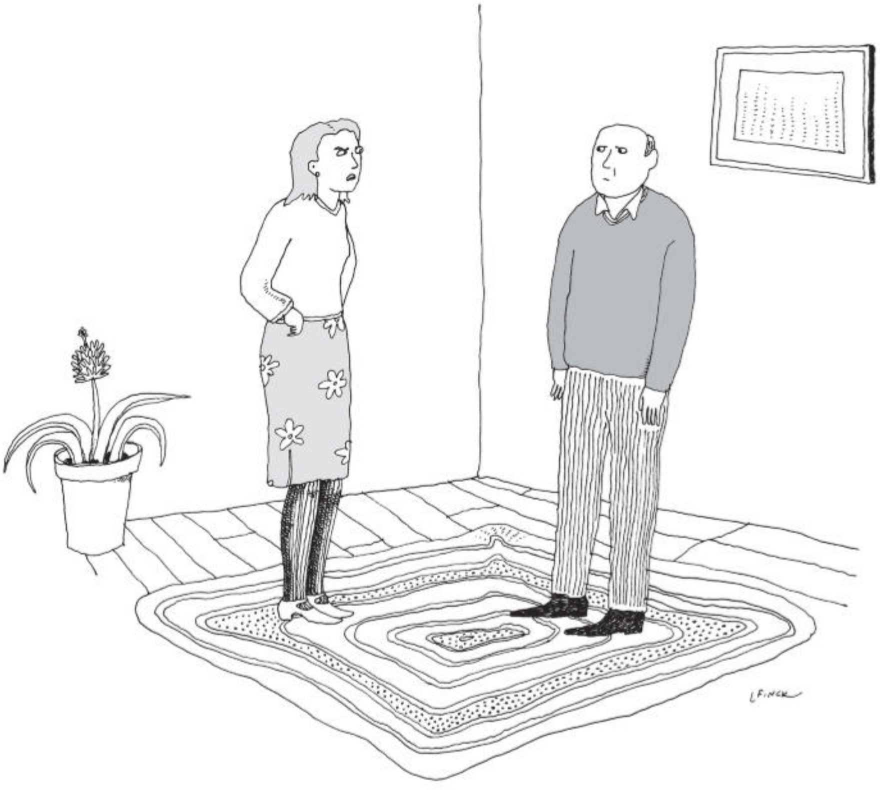
cluded that kuru had been transmitted to the chimpanzees, and in a paper for *The New England Journal of Medicine* they announced the discovery of an infectious disease whose behavior could not be explained by existing models of contagion. Kuru had none of the typical signs of infection, such as fever or immune response, and it defied the expectation that sickness would follow soon after exposure. The research suggested that the boundaries of infectious disease had been conceived too narrowly, and prompted scientists to reassess how they approached other degenerative illnesses. A 2013 paper in *Pathogens* called the discovery "one of the greatest contributions to biomedical sciences of the 20th century."

The kuru experiments, which won Gajdusek the Nobel Prize in 1976, put him in a position in which people around him rarely said no. "The more brains he acquired," the historian Warwick Anderson wrote, "the more opportunities he had to build relationships with other scientists, to make them indebted to him." During Ivan's first seven years in the U.S., Gajdusek adopted five more children, from Fais, an island in Micronesia with fewer than three hundred people, and from Ulithi, a nearby coral atoll—both places where he had gone to do medical research. Ivan didn't understand why Gajdusek kept bringing new children home. "It is disappointing me because you never told me about them," he wrote him, adding, "However, it's nice of you to bring them here and now so that they can replace me."

By the time Gajdusek brought his fifth child home, Ivan was at Swarthmore College, where he had been admitted after several of Gajdusek's friends wrote letters urging his acceptance. At the end of the first semester, a dean called Gajdusek and told him that Ivan could not continue. "The game is up," Gajdusek wrote. "It is their hope, now that our game of playing with the savage is over, that he will happily become a savage once again to relieve them of all moral responsibility, & me too." Ivan returned to Papua New Guinea, enrolled in college, and then dropped out. "I know my life is crazy and I just don't know how to communicate with anybody," Ivan wrote Gajdusek. "I am very scared about my future life. I do not know what want to become."

Undeterred, Gajdusek took home a second child from Papua New Guinea half a year later. The German missionary who had settled in the highlands had started a Lutheran school, and Gajdusek asked him to find a good candidate among the students. "It would probably be advisable if his age was just 12 or under," he wrote in a letter. "This would have the added advantage of half fare on the airlines and would further permit me to even contemplate bringing two." Gajdusek eventually drew up a list of eight students, and then decided on the youngest child, a twelve-year-old boy. In Tok Pisin, the country's main language, the boy wrote to his parents seeking permission. "A young master said he wants to take me to America," he wrote. "He is not taking me to go for nothing. He wants to take me there and he wants me to go to the big school of the white men."

In the seventies, in the wake of the Tuskegee scandal, a forty-year experiment in which hundreds of Black men with syphilis were studied without their knowledge and denied treatment, scientists began adhering to new regulations to protect human research subjects. But



“They’re in the closet, Gary. And this is the last time I tell you where we keep the skeletons.”

those rules didn’t apply to Gajdusek’s children, because he had incorporated them into his family. “How stupid I feel & how unable to reply, when people start to tell me how generous & how altruistic & how fine it is of me to bring the boys to America for education,” Gajdusek reflected in his journal. “I feel far more comfortable with those who worried, ask me for my real motives & my real purpose.”

In 1975, the year that Papua New Guinea gained independence from Australia, Luwi joined the second class of Fore children to attend a new government school in Purosa, a former colonial aid post, a day’s walk from his village. Before the lessons began, he said, “we went out into the bush, chopped wood, brought it back, and made chairs.” Gajdusek had given Luwi a copy of Webster’s Dictionary as a gift, and in his free time Luwi studied it. Some words he found perplexing, like “obliged”—it didn’t sound the way he thought it should.

As colonial administrators and missionaries had penetrated the highlands, the practice of cannibalism had ended and kuru had begun to recede. When new cases emerged, it was in people who had been exposed to the disease years before. “The scientists never cured anybody,” Luwi told me. “The only remedy they could find was telling people, ‘You have to change your life.’ ” He associated the end of the epidemic with the coming of churches and schools.

In 1981, Luwi was sitting in class when the headmaster of his school called his name on a megaphone. He and his desk mate, Iggy, were to report to the school office. Gajdusek was waiting there, to take them to the U.S. The headmaster had been reluctant to release them, but “I finally talked him into letting them go since I was now their legal guardian,” Gajdusek wrote in his journal. Two days earlier, Luwi’s uncle and Iggy’s parents had given their consent. Two other Fore children were also joining them. One, an eleven-year-old named Susanna, recalled crying when she learned where she was headed: “Carleton said, I will take you now, so I begin to cry more and so my mother said, stop crying so I shut my mouth.” In his journal, Gajdusek described her as “trickier than I expected.”

Luwi did not consider whether he wanted to leave. “He just picked us out of the room, and we were confused,” he said. “America was a country where no one could go except through some kind of miracle.” He had only a few minutes to gather his belongings in a cloth sack. The Webster’s Dictionary was too heavy to take, so he slipped it under a friend’s mattress as a gift.

Luwi’s cousin Rebecca, whose family he boarded with in Purosa during the school year, said, “I looked around and I didn’t see him, and I said, ‘Luwi? Where is Luwi?’ ” A classmate told her, “He’s fully gone. It was just that white man.”

Gajdusek drove Luwi and the other children to Goroka, where Ivan now lived. They spent the night at Ivan’s house. “We were Carleton’s new birds,” Luwi said. Ivan was married, with two children, and worked as the curator of a small museum that collected artifacts from the eastern highlands, like masks and shields. He was skeptical of Gajdusek’s plan. “I and my wife are really discouraging about you for taking too many new boys,” he had written Gajdusek five months earlier. “We would like to know how much are you going to get benefits from all these boys?”

Ivan’s daughter, Louisa, told me that her father had never spoken about his past. All she knew was that he’d been educated in the U.S. “My father doesn’t tell a story about where he came from, where he went. He doesn’t tell a story about anything,” she said. When Louisa asked her father about his time in the U.S., he told her, “Just forget it.”

Ivan took the children to the airport in Goroka and tried to give Luwi some advice about adjusting to the U.S., but Luwi doesn’t remember his words, except that his grammar was “corrupted.” Luwi felt sorry that Ivan hadn’t learned to speak English better. On the planes that took him across the world, Luwi vomited much of the way.

Luwi and the three other children moved into Prospect Hill, a dilapidated eighteenth-century estate in Frederick, Maryland. Five of Gajdusek’s boys were already living there. The house, which sat on six acres of land, had eight fireplaces, a gazebo, a volleyball court, and a swimming pool with a diving board, and was surrounded by hyacinths, wisteria, and cherry trees. There were no immediate neighbors and no telephone. Gajdusek described the living conditions as "haughty isolation." On Luwi's first day, Gajdusek gave the new children a tour of the N.I.H. "We were in a jungle of foreigners," Luwi recalled. The next day, Luwi started eighth grade at a local public school.

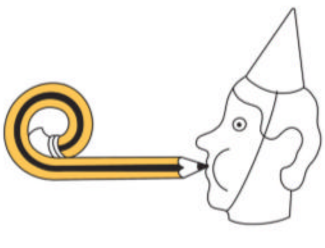
Wegstein, the computer scientist who had helped raise the first generation of boys, had developed Alzheimer's. A pediatric hematologist from China named Cheng-Ting Chin, who worked in Gajdusek's lab, moved into Prospect Hill. She asked Gajdusek to marry her, but in a letter he told her that he needed to be "free of binding personal ties and commitments except to my kids—who are all prepubertal when I pick them—and even with them," he added, "I want them as adults to reduce me to a memory alone." The people he really loved, he wrote in his journal, were "the small fish whom I can handle, play with, behold with love and wonder and return to the sea."

At the dinner table, Gajdusek sometimes read literature aloud for up to two hours. He had a standard list of authors that he pressed on his children: James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, Maxim Gorky, André Gide, D. H. Lawrence. "Read & read & even take notes or, at least, keep a list of titles & authors & any comments you can make," he wrote to one boy. He gave the children journals and then spent up to an hour at night correcting their entries. He compared himself to Lorenzo de' Medici, the fifteenth-century Florentine patron, looking for his Michelangelo.

"At 10:58pm Gajdusek gave me this note book," Luwi wrote one night, in a green cloth journal stamped with a Federal Supply Service stock number. He began entries the same way Gajdusek did: with the date, the time of day, and his location. "I was dreaming today that this notebook would be the most important book in the future in the History of Luwi," he wrote, adding, "I don't know what my wife and children will say if I give them this paper."

Some entries read like an anthropological account of suburban American adolescence. On his first day of school in 1984—"George Orwell's year," Luwi noted—he observed, "Everyone said to me 'Happy New Year' and they also asked me what I got for Christmas presents and asked me also about how my holiday was. It was working good for me." He internalized the frame through which Gajdusek saw his life. After a fight with Gajdusek about chores, he wrote, "(savages) (savages) (savages)." Luwi can't remember if Gajdusek was saying that word, or if he had used parentheses because he was imagining Gajdusek's thoughts.

"Carleton slap me on my chin couple of times, so I walked outside to the trash area and made a big fire and slept in the charcoal," Luwi wrote after another fight, over who would do the dishes. The next day, Luwi kept to himself, looking through books about Papua New Guinea. One book, "A Study in Nascent Literacy," comprised letters from his uncle Koiye, who had been one of Gajdusek's most loyal helpers, travelling with him and carrying his equipment. Luwi considered Koiye the first person in Waieti to become literate. Koiye's letters, composed when he was in his early teens, read like speeches that had been recorded. "You listen to my message," the letters often began, as if Koiye were standing up to make an announcement at a gathering. He listed people who had died of kuru, expressed how much he missed Ivan, and asked for supplies: ballpoint pens, books, a blanket, a guitar. He ended the notes by saying "I am Koiye" and "That is all. My short message is over."



Luwi showed the letters to the other children, and they laughed at Koiye's simple writing. "We took it as a joke," Luwi said. But he felt new respect for his uncle's metamorphosis. "He was learning to create a message out of thoughts," he said. That night, Luwi dreamed that he was back in his village, hunting. But he couldn't find any animals in the forest to kill. When he returned home, hungry, he wrote, "my father chased us and told us that a man who goes hunting doesn't come home without anything." The next day, Luwi had a similar daydream, but this time the disapproving patriarch was Gajdusek. After going to a store to buy cassettes, he wrote, "I walked back home slowly and dreamed that I was a very primitive boy, hiding in a cave after I saw Carleton."

Luwi got D's in algebra and woodshop, and his head almost "burnt down" when he had to stand up in his U.S.-history class and read aloud his paper about the War of 1812. "BOY DO I NEED HELP VERY MUCH," he wrote in his journal. But Gajdusek was often travelling, or busy with work. There were nights when no adult was at home. He and the other boys poured whiskey in their coffee in the morning, to keep warm as they walked to school. After Gajdusek stormed off one evening, angry that Luwi was being too noisy and hadn't done the laundry, Luwi wrote, "Good luck Carleton wherever you are out having a nice meal and maybe a glass of champagne but remember we depend on you."

In his journal, Gajdusek sometimes described sleeping in the same bed, naked, with his children, specifically the younger boys. Luwi said that Gajdusek commented on the growth of his penis and testicles and encouraged him to masturbate. Luwi couldn't categorize what Gajdusek was doing. "I just kept shut," he told me. "I could pretend that I was home, in the bush." His earliest memories of Gajdusek in Waieti also involved sexualized lessons. "He would take us to a safe place where we would feel free, and then ask us, 'What's the name of this thing?'" Luwi said. "He would ask about certain plants, the hands, the feet, the genitals. He would grab our balls and say, 'What do you call this?'"

Colonizers and anthropologists, too, often described foreign lands in erotic terms—as not-quite-real places where they fell in love with people's differences, as well as their newfound freedom and power. "I run from my work, my associates, my 'patterned life,' to find myself—a self growing fierce and strange," Gajdusek wrote. The scholar Anne McClintock likened the tropics to a "magic lantern of the mind onto which Europe projected its forbidden sexual desires." But Gajdusek made these fantasies portable. When he brought the children home, he continued to imagine that an attraction to boys—he recognized that his sexuality made him "an aberrant individual of our species"—could be indulged without harm.

Gideon Waiwaime, who was ten when he came to live with Gajdusek, said that Gajdusek would give him a medical exam a few times a year and squeeze his testicles for a length of time that surprised him. "I just thought that was part of the examination process," Gideon told me. "So I thought, We will just flow with it." His roommate, who was older, advised him to "stay away from the old man." Gideon said that when Gajdusek would pat the private parts of other boys, "We would make fun of it, like, 'Oh, I saw what the old man did to you.'" He felt that being touched by Gajdusek was "part of the package of coming to America."

Gajdusek often invited a dozen guests for dinner. "We cooked and prepared everything, like a restaurant for them," Luwi said. Gajdusek kept a guestbook that was signed by people who visited his house, including the mayor of Frederick; the First Lady of Jamaica; Benoit Mandelbrot, the mathematician who coined the term "fractal"; Ho Wang Lee, who discovered the Hantaan virus; and Göran K. Hansson, who was part of the Nobel Assembly for more than two decades and eventually became its secretary. As a Nobel laureate, Gajdusek was entitled to nominate other doctors and scientists for the prize, and visitors jockeyed to be "on the list," as Gajdusek put it. At the end of the meals, Luwi said, "we'd ask if we could make them coffee or get them ice cream." Ephraim Katzir, a biophysicist and the fourth President of Israel, wrote Gajdusek in a letter, "It was wonderful to see how you succeeded in transforming your 'kids' into a cooperative children's society."

Gajdusek was frequently invited to international medical conferences, and sometimes he took the children with him. On a trip to Italy, where he gave three lectures, he and Luwi both wrote down the make of the vehicle they rented, the time they checked in to their hotel, the straits they crossed in a ferry, the people who drove them, and the views from the windows—in almost identical terms. (Not all of Gajdusek's children took to their diaries with enthusiasm. "My feeling was very questionable," a boy from Tobi, a Micronesian island less than a mile long, wrote once. "I was not trying to remember anything.")

Luwi and the other highland boys sometimes attended Gajdusek's lectures about kuru, and Luwi sensed that their presence gave him more credibility. The children of mothers who died of kuru were at risk of developing the disease, too, since they had often taken part in mortuary feasts together. "It could already be in my system," Luwi said. "So they would just do a study on me, and it would be a good study, because, instead of those studies they did on the chimpanzees, they will have a real specimen in Washington."

During Luwi's third year in the U.S., Gajdusek read Henry James's first two novels, "Roderick Hudson" and "Watch and Ward." Both novels are about "would-be benefactors" who are "basically sexually crippled, gifted persons," Gajdusek observed. He was struck by James's insights about "the sense of undeserved obligation, and imprisonment or slavery or mind washing" in youth drawn into a benefactor's orbit. He copied several lines from "Roderick Hudson" into his journal. "May I learn ever better to produce freedom in adolescence & not bondage in all the kids I touch," he wrote.

During high school, Luwi mostly disappeared from Gajdusek's journals. He appears largely in lists of boys: going to a museum; playing soccer; navigating jet lag; obtaining college brochures; talking to Gajdusek, as they drive sixty miles per hour on the New Jersey Turnpike, about people dying from kuru at home. The children dissolve into a collective. "We the lads of the Pacific/Our Island very wide," one boy wrote in a poem. "When the doctor came to visit,/We followed for the ride."

Gajdusek often wrote about the ways in which "relationships of long standing slowly fall apart and disintegrate from neglect or directly destructive action," adding, "This fascinates me and since I am increasingly a part of such alienations I look at them in awe." He noted, "It remains as always, the 'denouement' that are the problem."

Luwi became one such source of trouble. In the fall of 1986, he went to Paul Smith's College, in upstate New York, where he remembers being among only a handful of students who weren't white. He drank heavily and didn't do his schoolwork. After a year, he flunked out. He told Gajdusek, "I cannot stay around this place anymore. I just want to go home." Gajdusek, who recognized that Luwi's year in college had "injured his ego," bought him a ticket to Papua New Guinea.

The night before his departure, Luwi's friends threw a party at a park and he stayed up all night drinking. When Gajdusek saw him early the next morning, he wrote, Luwi was "in tears & at times near to rage in inebriated disequilibrium, crying that I avoided him & 'never talked with him.'" A few hours later, Gajdusek took him to the airport and waved at him from the departure lounge as Luwi cried. "I am very glad that he is off," Gajdusek wrote.

That same day, Gajdusek's newest ward, Daniel, arrived from Micronesia. He was nine years old, the son of a man who had been one of the first generation of boys from Micronesia to come to the U.S. "I am in love with Daniel!" Gajdusek wrote, two days after Luwi left. "He is a wonderful, bright & alert & non-demanding small boy."

Luwi returned to Papua New Guinea feeling as if he had nothing to show for himself except for a "raw body." He stayed at Ivan's house, in Goroka, and worked at a store that sold food and tools. He didn't want to talk about his time in the U.S. "The explanations we use in English are different from the native tongue," he said. "In the native tongue, you have to collaborate with many, many words, and it could fall into a heap of words and still I cannot break it down."

Luwi was disoriented by how much had changed in the years he was gone. "As in the States, money is becoming 'everything' here in Papua New Guinea," he wrote to Gajdusek. He remembered an egalitarian way of living, but he discovered that *wantoks*—a Tok Pisin word meaning "one talk," or people who speak the same language—no longer "give away garden foods for nothing as it was in the old days."

SAINT PAUL

All my friends have their gods & their heavens
& their plans on how to get there. They forfeit sex
for Lent, pork for life, they light incense, they light
candles, they offer fruit to the dead.
Is this the right time to confess that once I bit a boy
for calling me a Buddhist? Never mind I was six
& did not know what Buddhist meant,
never mind we were inside a Buddhist temple.
For so long, I thought god was played by a rotating cast
of my dead. For so long, god was a boy with a ring of keys
on his belt loop. I never had as much faith as I did then,
but I never talked to god as much as I do now—now
that my want is just the want of birds. At some point,
someone invited me to Easter, then to Seder, then to Eid
& for a night I talked to Andrew's god, & for a night I
talked to Sam's god. I talked to Saf's god. I was a wick lit
by any god that wandered by—an appetite primed
for the miracles of others. & then Paul got sick
& then got better, & I said *thank you thank you*.
Paul & I are from a city first named after a bootlegger
& then renamed after a saint & when he died,
I caught a flight to a city only he knew, where the humidity
flattened the pleats I'd ironed into my pants.
All my life, I've bibled my humiliations, made saints of boys
in bad lighting, never considered heaven, only good weather.
But since all my dead have been called home by different gods,
I know they're not, like I imagined, all waiting in the same place
for me. For so long, I thought I could get through by throwing
my faith in the general direction of any pulpit.
Thank you friends for showing me your gods,
& thank you gods for showing me my friends,
but the heaven I choose is a heaven I can leave.

—Hieu Minh Nguyen

Luwi's desk mate from the highlands, Iggy, had come back to Papua New Guinea with an American college degree, and he'd found a job in government. But most of the other highland boys returned "naked," as Luwi's cousin Rebecca put it. (One boy ended up settling in the U.S.) Sena Anua, who had gone to America a year before Luwi, had also failed out of college and returned to his village. "I was ashamed to present myself before my family at home," Sena told me. Gajdusek had given him and his siblings the "map of life," he said, but most of them "didn't find the gate to that land."

A few of Luwi's classmates who had stayed in the highlands became police officers, health professionals, and teachers, and Luwi felt that his prospects would have been better if he'd never left for the U.S. He decided to go back to school, at the Divine Word Institute, on the north coast of Papua New Guinea. Gajdusek paid the school fees. But Luwi was still drinking, and, after a year, his grades weren't high enough to continue. "I guess I am just a born failure or loser," he wrote Gajdusek. "I thank you very much for your efforts in trying to get me back on track but I just couldn't."

He moved home to Waieti. In his journal, he called it "the back page." He married a cousin, but Waieti was different than he remembered. "Today, you could hardly hear a human sound of children playing or people chanting or singing," he told Gajdusek. Several families had moved to other villages or coastal areas. The center of Waieti had been taken over by wild grass.

Luwi occasionally travelled two days from Waieti to Goroka so that he could buy books from a thrift shop. "I laugh at myself," he told me. "Who do I think I am? What am I trying to prove?" He carried the books home in a military backpack. As he passed people on the road, he said, they'd call out, mockingly, "Where is that soldier man going?" He understood that what they meant was "You were in America, and now you are unemployed?" "The best thing for me to do was just to listen and walk on, because I cannot disagree with these people," he told me. In his journal, he wrote, "I am doing nothing but planning a plan for a plan to carry out a plan—plan-plan-plan-plan-plan."

Luwi was on the verge of declaring himself " 'UNFIT' to live up to this society," he told Gajdusek in a letter. But, he added, "my biggest hope and a dream that I always think of is of writing." He asked Gajdusek to send him pens and pads of paper, and to share the titles of "books that have something to do with social aspects of human life." Luwi wrote, "Just give me a name and I will take them up." Sometimes, when the weather was dry, he spent nights in the forest, in order to catch birds of paradise, known for their extravagant, jewel-like feathers, which he sold. He made a hut there with a leaf roof, and, when he heard the sound of flapping wings, he shot at the birds with arrows he'd made from umbrella spokes. As he waited in the hut, he said, "I made a hole in the forest so the light shined in, and started writing. I put my mind to the pages of my journal, explaining myself to myself."

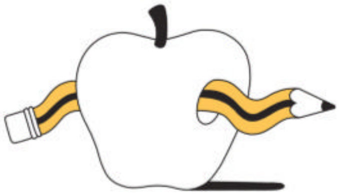
By the nineties, Gajdusek's lab had infected hundreds of animals with neurological diseases that resembled kuru. It had gradually become clear that the infectious agent in kuru and similar neurodegenerative diseases, such as Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease and fatal familial insomnia, was a misfolded protein called a prion—a word coined by Stanley Prusiner, a neurologist at the University of California, San Francisco, who in 1997 won a Nobel Prize for his discovery. Prusiner had studied kuru and, after a visit to the highlands in 1980, he had brought Sena Anua to the U.S., as a favor to Gajdusek. Sena was nine. “Stan says he is amply rewarded by the experience of bringing him to his first elevator, first hotel, first zoo, first restaurant,” Gajdusek wrote in his journal.

Mark Godec, a fellow in Gajdusek’s lab, said that, when he saw Gajdusek at the N.I.H., “he was usually surrounded by a half-dozen boys, some of whom looked no more than nine or ten.” Godec decided to read through Gajdusek’s journals from the fifties, sixties, and seventies, which were stacked on a shelf. “They were right there, up above my desk,” he told me. He was shocked by the number of prepubescent children who Gajdusek seemed to think had been “flirting” with or “seducing” him.

Judith Farquhar, the University of Chicago anthropologist who had worked in Gajdusek’s lab, had warned Gajdusek years earlier that it would be better to privately print his more personal journals, rather than to rely on the N.I.H. to fund the process and to use its staff to transcribe and bind them. “Discussions that may look veiled to you look pretty transparent to me,” Farquhar wrote. When I asked what had concerned her, she said, “Well, of course, it was the threat of suspicions of sexual misconduct.” She said that as Gajdusek had aged, he’d kept confessing his sexual interests “to the point that all of us were completely bored by it.”

When Godec asked colleagues what they made of their lab chief’s behavior, he said, “it was clear that a consensus had been arrived at: this is none of our business.” In 1995, after working in the lab for several years, he brought a box of Gajdusek’s journals to Senator Nancy Kassebaum, the chair of the Committee on Labor and Human Resources, which oversaw the N.I.H. He had put Post-it notes on the pages where there were sexual descriptions of boys. Godec told me, “I realized I’m in the middle of a pedophile operation that has been run out of the N.I.H. by a Nobel laureate for thirty years.” (In the eighties, police in Maryland had investigated Gajdusek after at least one American man, the son of an N.I.H. colleague, complained of being sexually abused in the sixties, as a child, but the case had been closed when the police couldn’t find recent victims.)

The Office of Inspector General and the F.B.I. opened investigations. Frank Adelman, an agent for the O.I.G., began interviewing scientists in Gajdusek’s lab, but they were “terribly protective,” Adelman told me. “They didn’t see anything wrong with what Gajdusek was doing. They thought the man was a saint.” David Asher, a scientist who had worked in Gajdusek’s lab for twenty-five years, told Adelman, “Whatever Gajdusek has done, he has done it openly and with the full knowledge and consent of the management of N.I.N.D.S.”—the section within the N.I.H. focussed on neurological conditions.



By the early nineties, Gajdusek had nine children and young adults in his home, and he no longer believed his educational program was going to produce a “Rimbaud or a Baudelaire,” he wrote. “I am not a gardener who can prune out, rather an ecologist faced with preservation of the human wilderness.” Some of the children were getting into fights at school; others were shoplifting and drinking. They threw pool parties that lasted until dawn. “I don’t want you to ending up like some of Carleton’s boys, who are now not doing any important things for themselves,” Ivan wrote to his daughter, Louisa, who was living in Gajdusek’s house. Ivan had also sent his son, named Carleton, but he was arrested for theft and, rather than face charges, returned home. Kelly Watson, a professor at West Virginia University who writes about colonialism and is working on a book about Gajdusek, went to high school with some of the boys at the time. She said that they had been known for the rowdy parties they threw. Gajdusek’s house was seen as a place to drink and do drugs.

An F.B.I. agent began trying to interview the children, but the only one who spoke freely was a twenty-three-year-old whom I’ll call Michael. He had met Gajdusek in Pohnpei, a volcanic island in Micronesia, when he was fourteen. His departure was arranged so quickly, Michael told me, that he never said goodbye to his parents. In America, Gajdusek quickly found ways to touch him. “Being a doctor, he could say, ‘Hey, come here. I need to check you, because you’ve got to make sure your medical is clear,’ or whatever,” Michael said. “I didn’t understand it. I was always finding reasons to explain it to myself.”

In his journal, Gajdusek described Michael as “aloof in a strangely disturbing way,” often “slinking into the house” without announcing his arrival. “I detect a certain rage,” Gajdusek noted. After a fight, Michael said he wanted to go home, explaining, Gajdusek wrote, that “he has always wanted to anyway, it is me who is holding him here.” By the time Michael was in college, Gajdusek acknowledged that the relationship was “pathological,” but he blamed Michael. “I keep hoping and praying that he will resolve his peculiar conflicts with me,” he wrote.

Michael agreed to secretly record a conversation with Gajdusek for the F.B.I. In 1996, he called Gajdusek at his lab and said that investigators had been trying to question him.

Gajdusek was about to leave for Paris for a conference on prion diseases, where he would give the keynote lecture. He told Michael that he should simply say that he was never molested.

“So you want, you want me to, like, lie to them?” Michael asked.

“Yes,” Gajdusek said. “Absolutely.”

“Well, now that I’m thinking about it, I wanna know why.”

“What?”

“I wanna know why you did it to me.”

Gajdusek switched to a private line in his office. “Look,” he said. “If you go on and talk to people about that, you’re gonna get us in so much trouble that you’re gonna close the life down for the kids at college, close my accounts down. I’ll have to go out of the country. Catch on?”

“Don’t you understand that what you did to me, you know, possibly has to do with a lot of why I’m so disturbed while I’m here in America?”

“I played around with my uncle as a kid,” Gajdusek said. “I played around with my brother.” He said that kids in Micronesia and Papua New Guinea did the same thing.

“I don’t know where you learned that from,” Michael said. “You’re the first one who did it to me." He recalled how Gajdusek "did oral sex" on him "many times in different places." He asked, "Didn't you realize that I didn't want to do it?"

"No, that I didn't," Gajdusek said.

"I was scared. You were hurting me."

"Oh, I didn't know," Gajdusek said. "I apologize, and I'm very sorry." He said that he wished Michael had told him earlier. "The story is . . . that I am . . . a person who has a very difficult, great private life. I'm trying to find how to identify, and I tried to . . . transpose it like a priest or a nun to—"

"Carleton, I'm getting the feeling that you brought us here just . . . for your . . . own purpose," Michael said.

"Oh, Jesus," Gajdusek said.

"That's what I'm getting from you," Michael continued. "I don't know about the girls, but all the boys in the house—I know they tend to joke about stuff like that, and we're trying to keep it in the house, 'cause in some way we tried to protect you." He asked Gajdusek, "How long have you been doing this?"

"All my life," Gajdusek responded. But he said that he was as committed to his children as any American parent.

"You know, other people could make as much commitment and have good results," Michael said, adding that he had "studied carefully the statistics" and that only a fraction of the boys Gajdusek had raised were doing well.

"Well, I managed to take care of an awful lot of people who are grateful," Gajdusek said.

"They took care of themselves like we are doing right now," Michael said. "If you think taking care of kids is throwing money in their hands and—"

"I don't throw money around," Gajdusek said. "I give time. Time and attention."

"No, attention is the last thing you give to any of us," Michael said.

Gajdusek was arrested three weeks later, on his way back from the trip, during which he had received his twelfth honorary doctorate. He was charged with two counts of child abuse. Another boy from Micronesia, who had been eleven when he came to the U.S., had said that he, too, was molested. Not long after he gave a statement, though, his father and uncle went to Maryland to get custody of him and take him home. The boy retracted what he'd said.

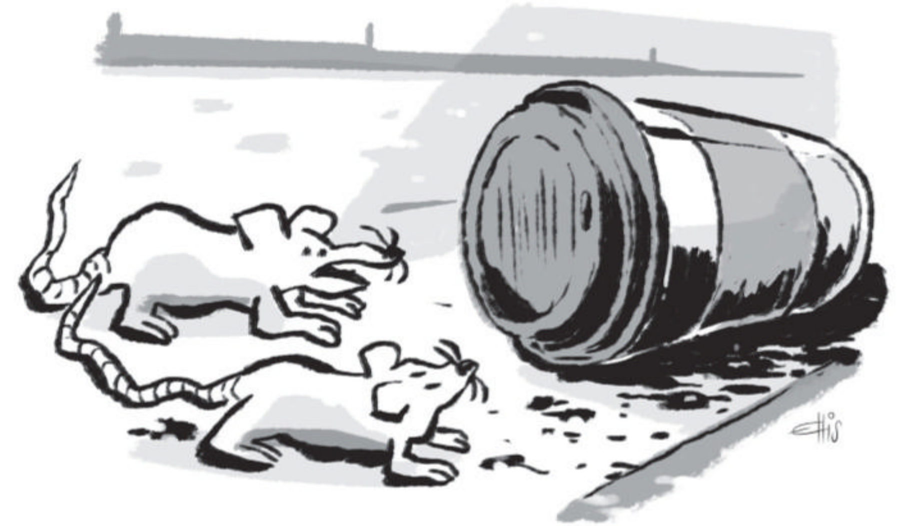
Luwi told me that Tok Pisin does not have a term for "sexual abuse." "Such matters are never openly discussed or thought about in our community," he said. "We knew there were limitations, that Carleton had some ways of approaching us," but Luwi did not consider himself a victim. "It would appear in my journals," he told me. "I would have written about it." His journal, he said, was proof of Gajdusek's character. Luwi understood Gajdusek to be a "child lover," but he couldn't separate the attention he hadn't wanted from the attention that had made him who he was.

"I know I want to become like you—not in your big ways and your name, but in my own little way," Luwi wrote Gajdusek, as soon as he learned of his arrest. "CARLETON IS ANOTHER KIND ALTOGETHER—HE IS LIKE AN IDOL, OR LIKE GOD." He went on, "If I were the angel at the gates of heaven, deciding the fate of men, Carleton, you would pass through the gate on a mattress of comfort accompanied by a thousand angels with music that would just sweep you away into everlasting happiness in Paradise."

At least ten of Gajdusek's adopted children also wrote letters of sympathy and support, but implicit in their praise was a different sort of injury. "I saw in you all I wanted to see and all I wanted to be," one wrote. "For the rest of my life I've had to try to reconcile that with what I am."

In his journals and in letters to colleagues, Gajdusek was self-righteous, arguing that what he'd done was "no more serious than lying on the grass or picking a dandelion," and he cited the Anga initiation rites as justification. These ceremonies had brought boys into their communities, as part of a shared passage into manhood, but Gajdusek treated them as a timeless license for the acts that he'd committed privately, one boy at a time. George Klein, a professor at the Karolinska Institute, in Stockholm, who was part of the Nobel Assembly for thirty-six years, validated Gajdusek's opinions, telling him that he wondered if "the Western world can 'catch up with you.'" He wrote, "I share your indignation about the typically Jewish-Christian-Moslem hypocrisy on sexual matters." Gajdusek was troubled, though, by how many colleagues wrote letters saying that they knew the charges must be untrue. "I thought better of my friends," he said. "They are dissimulating and lying."

In February, 1997, Gajdusek pleaded guilty. As part of his agreement, he would serve only a year in jail, at the Frederick County Detention Center, and he could leave the country upon his release. The prosecutor, Scott Rolle, told me, "The rest of the case fell apart when the potential victims were squirrelled away and disappeared back to the Western Pacific." Ivan had flown to the U.S. to retrieve Gideon Waiwaime and another child, who had both been placed in foster care following Gajdusek's arrest. After Gideon returned to his village, he wrote



"The city has really changed. When I was a kid, that coffee cup wasn't there."

Gajdusek a poem that began, "This is the end of me but you live on."

Gajdusek enjoyed jail. "I find myself more productive and hedonistically lost in essay writing (thousands of pages) and reading and studying than ever before in my life," he wrote. His year of detention, he realized, could be his "longest and best Journal." He marvelled at the "great efficiency" of incarceration. The sink and toilet were just feet from his bed. Meals and mail were delivered to his door. "How the time in jail has flown by!" he wrote. "I have more books than I can use and access to inter library loan without leaving my seat."

The N.I.H. did not fire Gajdusek; instead, he was allowed to resign. Robert Gallo, an AIDS researcher and at the time one of the most widely cited scientists in the world, helped arrange an office for him at the Institute of Human Virology, at the University of Maryland, and invited him to join the editorial board of its journal. In jail, Gajdusek continued publishing academic papers. He wrote in his diary that Gustav Nossal, the president of the Australian Academy of Science, had assured him that he was working to secure an appointment for him at the Australian National University. (The position never materialized.) E. Fuller Torrey, one of the country's best-known schizophrenia researchers, assisted with smaller matters, like checking to see if Gajdusek was permitted a twenty-pound copy of the Cambridge Shakespeare in his cell.

On the day of Gajdusek's release, friends, including the neurologist Oliver Sacks and the physicist Freeman Dyson, met him at the jail, along with four of the children he had brought up. "Whatever he may or may not have been doing, it was clearly not bad for the kids," Dyson said in an interview for a 2014 book titled "Great Minds." Dyson said that he had three heroes: Richard Feynman, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Gajdusek. "When he came out of jail, the first thing he said was 'They broke Oscar Wilde, but they did not break me,'" Dyson said. "So he is definitely a hero."

The evening of his release, Gajdusek took a flight to Paris, where a French research center, the Institut de Neurobiologie Alfred Fessard, had arranged for him to have his own office. The institute also published the journal he had kept the year of his arrest. It was titled "Ascent to the Zenith Was Magnificent: Denouement Was a Bit Difficult."

In 2011, Luwi learned of rumors in his village that he was a sorcerer. The wife of a local councillor, an elected village representative, had suddenly died. Luwi assumed that the woman had a disease that was never properly diagnosed. "There is a reason why people die," he wrote in his journal. But villagers said that he had caused her demise.

Despite the end of kuru, sorcery accusations had persisted, spreading to places where they hadn't previously been part of the belief system. In many regions of Papua New Guinea, the accused were vulnerable, marginalized women, but in the highlands accusations were sometimes made against men who were seen as accruing unfair advantage or prestige, or who stood apart from the group. Miranda Forsyth, a scholar at the Australian National University who studies sorcery violence in Papua New Guinea, said, "Sorcery accusations are intensely related to jealousy, to the sense that some people have access to things that others don't have. It's a way of making sense of new inequalities in a society that had never previously had these differences."

Luwi said that, after kuru ended, the first person in his village to be targeted as a sorcerer was his uncle Koiye. In 1993, Koiye, who had been living in Gajdusek's abandoned house, was accused of using secret powers to cause another man's death. A group of men shot him with arrows—three of them landed in his chest—and chased him out of the village.

Luwi, who moved into Gajdusek's house after Koiye fled it, spent years keeping his distance from his uncle, so as not to attract suspicion, too. In his journal, in 2011, he listed points that had become the "base for my accusers": he'd played cards with an unusual amount of money at the woman's funeral; he'd been bitten by her husband's dog. "Oh please God! Help me," he wrote. "I am pure—innocence—not even a clue in the death!"

Luwi decided that it was no longer safe to go to funerals, where suspicions often festered. "Information gathered here makes up a strong support/base for accusations," he wrote. But, in 2013, when a close friend died, Luwi, who had four children, could not stay away. He put his friend's wooden casket in front of his house so that people could pay their respects. The coffin was covered with mud, and, before bringing it inside his house, Luwi cleaned it off with a bucket of water and a sponge. "This was my greatest mistake, which almost cost me my life," he said. "The people who were looking at me as a sorcerer—it confirmed that I had killed this man, too."

Two months later, Luwi was playing cards with friends under a tree when a man came from behind and struck him in the head with a machete. "The Day I was Chopped" was the next entry in his journal. The wound in his skull was five centimetres deep and twelve centimetres long. Lying in a hospital bed in Goroka, he wrote, "I still see the man running & jumping over my flower beds. I keep asking myself the reasons why I was chopped like a hog."

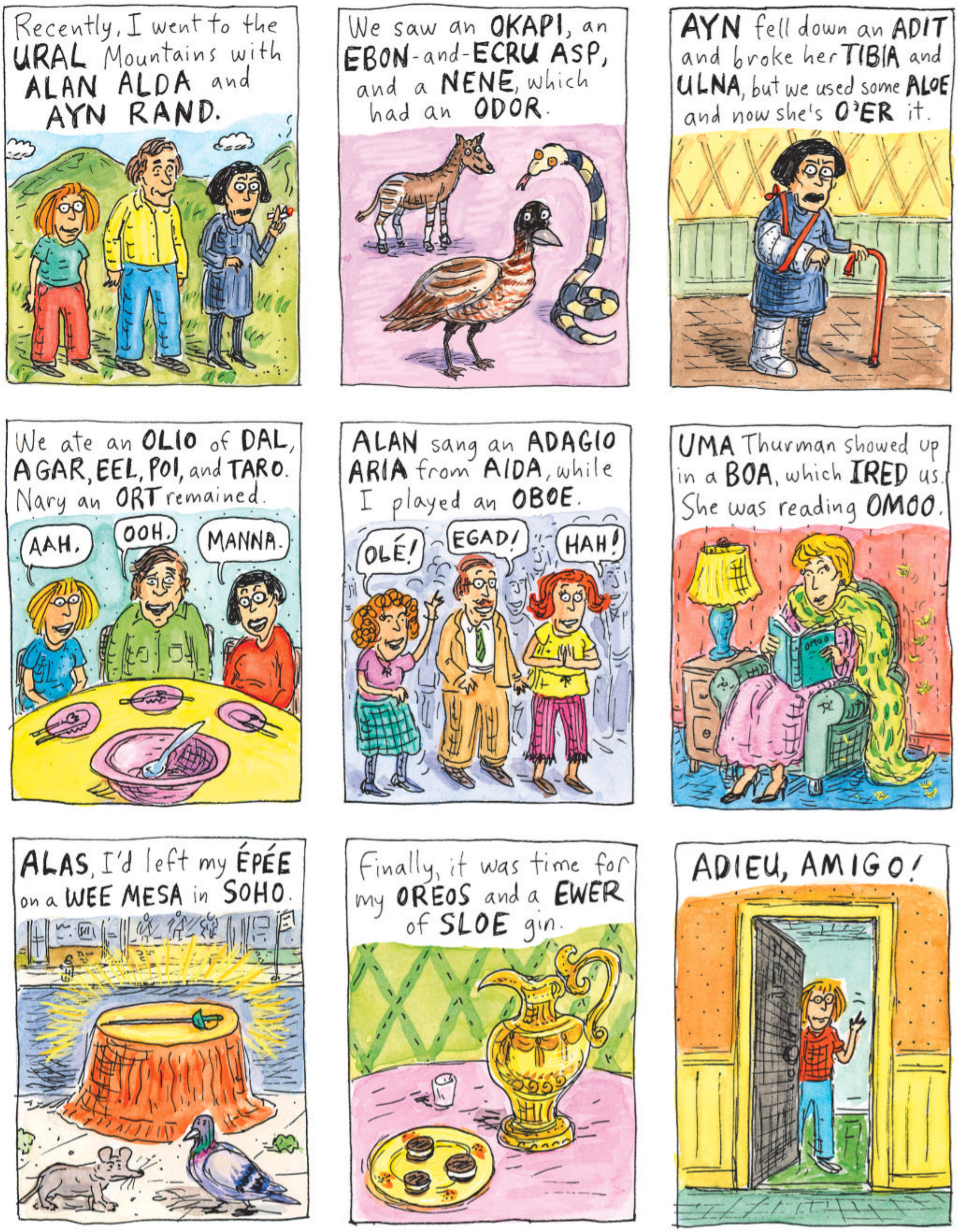
Luwi was hospitalized for nearly three months and required several blood transfusions. He couldn't understand how people could think that he, of all people, would practice sorcery. "I am the son of one of the world's greatest scientists," he said. "Carleton did not teach me to be a sorcerer." In his journal, Luwi wrote, "If they still cannot figure out the kind of man I am, I have left them at the house more than 10 years of my diary records of my life. . . . That should help them to assess me more." But his house had been looted, his belongings, including two decades' worth of journals, redistributed or destroyed.

By then, Gajdusek was dead, his journals documenting his physical decline preserved at the National Library of Medicine. "I carried my lifelong pederasty into my medical career and succeeded in both with very few failures," he wrote, two months before he died. "Without protectors I would never have succeeded." He had spent the last decade of his life living in Europe and travelling for lectures and conferences. "Yes, I have lived a full life and with all the weirdness and quirks of my health and my personality," he wrote, "I managed to twist it into an adventurous, almost mythological one, and for that I can only rejoice."

Luwi told his wife and children to consider him part "dead man." They had been chased away from Waieti and had had to settle in a new village. Luwi's

SKETCHBOOK BY ROZ CHAST

A CROSSWORD ODYSSEY


Recently, I went to the URAL Mountains with ALAN ALDA and AYN RAND.
We saw an OKAPI, an EBON-and-ECRU ASP, and a NENE, which had an ODOR.
AYN fell down an ADIT and broke her TIBIA and ULNA, but we used some ALOE and now she's O'ER it.
We ate an OLIO of DAL, AGAR, EEL, POI, and TARO. Nary an ORT remained.
AAH.
OOH.
MANNA.
ALAN sang an ADAGIO ARIA from AIDA, while I played an OBOE.
OLÉ!
EGAD!
HAH!
UMA Thurman showed up in a BOA, which IRED us. She was reading OMOO.
OMOO
ALAS, I'd left my ÉPÉE on a WEE MESA in SOHO.
Finally, it was time for my OREOS and a EWER of SLOE gin.
ADIEU, AMIGO!

source of income, a coffee garden, went unharvested. He stayed in Goroka, because he was not medically stable enough to be far from a hospital; he could no longer do physical labor. He missed his children so much that he liked to imagine that they were sending him messages—"sang to me by the birds," he wrote.

He was dizzy and wobbly when he walked. "I will always be 'that man,'" he wrote in his journal. "There he is—yes, that's him." His vision was blurred, and his body throbbed. "I cannot relate all these pains to a more soothing example than that of the dying kuru patients that I had witnessed," he wrote. "The pains I saw them going through and the laughs children had watching them stumble to ground."

Luwi still has a photograph of his skull wound, taken three days after the attack, as well as the medical record of his hospital stay, inserted on the first page of his journal, a black leather notebook with a snap. He lives in a shack that he built on the outskirts of Goroka, hanging canvas over sticks to create a veranda. He sleeps on a strip of foam. He shares the space with his sixth-grade teacher, whose class he'd been in before he disappeared to the U.S. "I decided to take him in so that I could continue to learn from his feedback," Luwi told me. "My teacher's children say, 'You two are a good father and son.'"

I had looked for Luwi after reading his American journals from the eighties, which were archived at the National Library of Medicine. The first time he and I spoke, using the phone of Antonia Mission, a reporter in Goroka who had helped me find him, Luwi brought his current journal to the screen. "Every year I keep completing one of these," he said. He sat on a bench in the sun, leaning against a mustard-yellow cinder-block wall. He told me that he still gravitated to the authors Gajdusek had recommended, and he summarized an idea he'd taken from Dostoyevsky: "Happiness cannot be earned by a reasoned plan of existence," he said, "but must be earned by suffering."

About six weeks later, I flew thirty-three hours to Goroka to meet with him and other men who had been brought up by Gajdusek. Luwi was waiting outside the fence of the airport, which is situated in the center of Goroka, its runway stretching almost as long as the town itself. He walked with a well-disguised limp and wore a cap that read "Jesus Is Lord, Christ" covering his wound. Sena Anua and Launako Wate, another man who had lived at Prospect Hill, were standing next to him. They had travelled several hours, by bus and on foot.

"May I openly express my feelings?" Sena, a subsistence farmer, asked me, on my first morning in town. "You are here on his scribbles," he began, referring to Luwi. Then he told him, "You lead. I'm only here to back you up. I have never been proud, but I am proud of you, and I want you to know that I am behind you." For the rest of the day, Sena, who had the bearing of a professor and seemed accustomed to an audience, wouldn't say more than a sentence or two about himself. He, too, had a story he wanted to tell: Sena's father had assisted Gajdusek with autopsies—he was known as the "thief man" or "grave looter"—and Sena, who had also helped kuru researchers with their work, felt that he and his father had not been properly credited. But he refused to share more than a few details. Understanding that stories are seldom told from more than one perspective, he didn't want to diffuse Luwi's claim. "I will explain, but only to a limit," he said, when I asked him a question. Launako was even more deferential. In the course of six hours, he said just a few words.

Since the machete attack, Luwi had begun writing with a new purpose. After investigating why he was targeted—he believed suspicion first fell on him after a land dispute—he decided to "carefully assess and evaluate . . . my 17 years residency in my village," he wrote, so that he could understand why sorcery retained such force. There are no reliable data about the number of sorcery-related attacks in Papua New Guinea, because victims and witnesses, fearing

"And, of course, my favorite thing to do with the boat is sail out to open water and scream, and scream, and scream."

retribution, seldom report these crimes, and police officers often share the accusers' beliefs. But ethnographers and aid workers say that attacks against suspected sorcerers have risen in the past half century, becoming more public and improvised, and no longer following inherited traditions. The hospital in Goroka where Luwi was treated published a report, in 2004, describing how an increasing number of families were requesting postmortem examinations, to determine if sorcery was the cause of a relative's death (through the removal of organs, poisoning, or other means). "Who are the leaders—how we bury our dead—it is time to look to dig up how we basically live," Luwi wrote in his journal.

He believed that the kuru researchers had failed to address the problem their research was supposed to resolve. "The white men did not understand how sorcery is embedded in the system of life," he said. The kuru epidemic had ended, but premature deaths continued; according to one count, one in eight children in the eastern highlands died before the age of five. Scientists had not offered a compelling enough theory of illness to replace the old ones. "America and the world can brag about the kuru studies and the many, many prizes, but what was the outcome of those studies?" Luwi asked. "They took a handful of us to America to be educated, but something could have been done for the community—they built no school, no clinic, no project for women to be who they can be." He told me, "They took what they wanted and left us with an empty bowl."

Gideon Waiwaime, who had been in the U.S. with Gajdusek for five years, said that once he was back home, in the Anga region, when people fell sick, the limits of what could explain it felt different: "It's hard to say whether it's a natural-born disease or they're trying to kill you." His father, after years of carrying Gajdusek's belongings, had been accused of being a "poison man" and had had to flee their village. Then, when Gideon was working at a school in his village, he was targeted, too. He saw men running toward him with machetes. "They tried to catch up with me, but I was faster than them," he said. He ended up escaping to Port Moresby, the country's capital, but he couldn't find work there.

It seemed to Gideon and Luwi that an uncanny number of boys who had worked with, or been brought up by, Gajdusek were labelled sorcerers. Perhaps some of the same qualities that had drawn Gajdusek to them, and that they had then cultivated in the U.S.—aspiration, independence, boldness—also made them recognizable as sorcerers. "Those who do not comply with the village's ideas or thoughts—the village has to find a way to eliminate them," Luwi said.

After my visit, Gideon, who lives in a settlement near the Port Moresby airport, texted me that he had spent the day watching "dark clouds of smoke rising." His brother-in-law had been accused of sorcery, and his home had been set on fire. Gideon heard that his own name was on a list of people marked to be killed. He stayed inside his house. "i am always locked up," he wrote me. "My best way is to watch every step i take and not trust anyone, unless i am out of PNG then i will be free. all of us (Carleton's kids) are not safe here."

Luwi plans for his autobiography to be titled "U-Turn," he said, "because I have been going, going, going, and then I decided to turn around and see how I walked." He told me, "Carleton spent time observing us, but our people were also watching Carleton. So the story was both ways." He said that Gajdusek used to walk in the graveyard in Waieti at night; Luwi still wonders what exactly he was doing. Some people, he said, theorized that "Carleton is one of our dead relatives, and now he's here with us, communicating with spirits." Luwi wanted to compile the villagers' memories into a report, creating an archive of his own. He wrote in his journal, "I hope to interview every citizen of the village where Carleton lived the good part of his life—what they recall of Carleton in those days, where they went and what they did and how they felt about Carleton."

Ivan had already died, in 2005, from an asthma attack. He went to the hospital in Goroka to use a nebulizer, as he had done many times before, but there was a shortage that day. "I am thinking about my life story and I will write about how you brought me up from a Primitive culture to the Modern world," he wrote Gajdusek in a letter. "Maybe you can help me to write this story. What do you think?" But his daughter, Louisa, said that, even at the end of his life, her father's past remained a mystery to her. "Only Carleton knew and wrote the story in his journals," she said.

Gideon was working on telling his story, too. "She left the land where autumn softly falls,/To seek the echoes hidden in my walls," he wrote in a poem after my visit. In the U.S., he'd identified as a writer—Gajdusek had mused that Gideon was "perhaps the only creative one of my dozen of younger kids"—but when he returned to Papua New Guinea, after Gajdusek was arrested, he lost his inspiration. Following our conversations, though, he began writing again—a memoir, as well as a flurry of poems, twelve of which were titled "Tribute to Carleton Gajdusek." Each of the tributes, written in the span of thirteen days, expressed different registers of ambivalent gratitude for Gajdusek's "sacrifice" for taking him in as his child. "What have you gotten out of this?" he wrote. "Have you made a perception of my story?" The poems captured the pain of being equipped for a life he couldn't have. Twice, he wrote, "I wish I were not myself to begin with."

Luwi also struggled with the sense that what he had lived through, though it had altered the course of science elsewhere—a third Nobel Prize, stemming indirectly from Gajdusek's kuru work, was awarded in 2002, to a Swiss chemist who'd determined the structure of prions—left little mark in Waieti and beyond. Years earlier, Luwi had fought to change the name of his children's primary school to Gajdusek Memorial Community School. His proposal was rejected. Still, he had other plans for stirring people's memories. Grass had grown over Gajdusek's house, and it had become part of the forest again. But Luwi had saved some of Gajdusek's old magazines from the place, as well as his gas cylinders and Coleman lanterns. "What can you do with things that have gone out of use?" he asked. "I'm thinking about storing them up for a museum—anything to help us remember that something serious happened on that mountain." ♦

PROFILES

FIGHTING WORDS

Mahmoud Khalil was detained for protesting Israel. Now he's on the verge of being deported.

BY ANDREW MARANTZ

It may or may not be true that all happy families are alike, but it's certainly true that any married couple with a car, happy or unhappy, must at some point decide who will do the driving. For Mahmoud Khalil and his wife, Noor Abdalla, this was not a difficult decision. Khalil, who is thirty-one, spent his youth in a Palestinian refugee camp in Damascus, where he didn't have much time for driving lessons; until recently, he was on track to become a high-level diplomat, a career that usually involves not driving but being driven. Abdalla, on the other hand, was born and raised in Flint, Michigan, and she learned to drive before she could see easily over the dashboard. (She is still short enough that this seems to require some effort, though she is now a thirty-year-old dentist who until recently had a daily commute.) In the inveterate American tradition, she treats her car as a second living room. "It's where I'm most comfortable," she said this past fall, giving her steering wheel an affectionate pat.

It was a Tuesday in October, just after dawn, and a pink sun was rising over the oil-distillation towers of northern New Jersey. Abdalla was making good time from Brooklyn to the federal courthouse in Philadelphia, where the couple would observe oral arguments in what Khalil dryly called "one of my cases." He sat in the passenger seat, holding a phone in each hand: his own, from which he texted members of his sprawling pro-bono legal team, and Abdalla's, which he used to d.j. The music, mostly old Levantine folk songs, was interrupted every now and then by a notification from a navigation app, in English: "Police ahead."

Khalil moved to Manhattan in 2022, and he adapted quickly to American culture. (In a sense, he even came to inhabit that most American of identities: an influencer.) At Columbia, where he was a master's student in public and international affairs, he became perhaps the most visible pro-Palestine activist. After the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023, and the Israeli invasion of Gaza, there were turbulent protests at many universities, and those at Columbia were often featured on TV news. Khalil, one of the few student protesters who never wore a mask to hide his face, became a symbol of the anti-Zionist movement. President Donald Trump, a few weeks into his second term, was standing next to Elon Musk, shilling Teslas on the White House lawn, when a reporter asked about Khalil. "I think we ought to get him the hell out of the country," Trump said. Although Khalil was a legal permanent resident, Marco Rubio, the Secretary of State, wrote a three-paragraph memo declaring him "deportable" owing to his "beliefs, statements, or associations." Khalil was sent to an ICE detention center in rural Louisiana, where he was held for more than a hundred days, missing the birth of his son.

In Philadelphia, Abdalla parked a few blocks from the Liberty Bell, smoothed her hijab, and swapped her sneakers for high heels. Khalil made a half-hearted attempt to disguise himself, as he often does before going out in public, putting on a baseball cap emblazoned with the word "Lucky." Every time he approached a door, he stepped aside, bowing slightly and stretching a chivalrous arm in front of him, until everyone else had gone. He passed through security and into the marble lobby of the courthouse, where the words of a renowned jurist named Learned Hand were etched on a glass panel: "If we are to keep our democracy, there must be one commandment: Thou shalt not ration justice."

The hearing was before three federal judges, each appointed by a different President. The casting seemed almost too on the nose. The Trump appointee, a white guy with a thick beard, interrupted early and often, his eyes bulging with incredulity. The Joe Biden appointee, the first Black woman to become a Third Circuit judge, occasionally raised her eyebrows but remained mostly silent. In the middle, figuratively and literally, was a silver-haired judge appointed by George W. Bush. The judges were hearing one of several appeals, spread across various state and federal districts, in a case called Khalil v. Trump, which, in addition to determining Khalil's fate, could set stark precedents in immigration law, national-security law, and the interpretation of the First Amendment. Lawyers for the government did not dispute that Khalil was in the U.S. legally, that the Administration had targeted him because of his political opinions, or that this might have a chilling effect on other people's speech. Rather, at various points in the case, they simply seemed to suggest that the President had the authority to detain Khalil despite these constitutional concerns, and that federal courts could not stop him.

After the hearing, Khalil and his lawyers posed for photos in front of the National Constitution Center, where all forty-five words of the First Amendment were engraved on a fifty-ton slab of marble, then walked to a ramen bar for lunch. Before starting the drive home, Khalil and Abdalla spent a couple of hours at a science museum called the Franklin Institute. He stopped at a series of interactive screens, learning the proper form for pitching a baseball, and how high he would be able to jump on Mars. On one screen, part of an exhibition on mental health, a prompt read "How are you feeling today?" The options were "Excited," "Confident," and "Sad." He considered them for a moment, then moved on without registering a choice.

The majority opinion, by the two Republican appointees, came down on a Thursday morning in January. It stripped Khalil of his previous legal protections, making him vulnerable to deportation. And it went further, narrowing the right

The Trump Administration says Khalil's statements would be lawful except that they compromise "core American interests."

PHOTOGRAPH BY SHARIF HAMZA

to habeas corpus, which protects people from unlawful detention. "We game-planned for five scenarios—one to five, from best to worst," one of Khalil's lawyers told me. "We're in Scenario 5." For decades, both left- and right-leaning judges had taken for granted that constitutional rights like habeas corpus applied to everyone on American soil, citizen or not. But now the Trump Administration was calling such long-standing principles into question, and some judges seemed inclined to follow its lead. ("The writ of habeas corpus can be suspended in a time of invasion, so that is an option we're actively looking at," Stephen Miller, one of Trump's senior advisers, had told reporters.) When I spoke with Khalil, he said, "I did nothing illegal, so of course I will do whatever I can to stay." And yet, he added, "it isn't shocking, in my life and in the stories I grew up hearing from my relatives, this concept that, one day, you might be forced to leave."

For now, Khalil lives in Brooklyn, not far from Prospect Park, in a building with tall vases of flowers and soothing music in the lobby. The first time I visited his apartment, he answered the door barefoot, holding Deen, his six-month-old son, who was sandy-haired and ample-cheeked, still yawning after a nap. All babies are cute, but this was a gratuitously good-looking baby—like a Rubens portrait of the infant Jesus, if the Flemish had been more realistic about a Nazarene's complexion. Khalil, with a half smile, craned his neck into the hallway and looked behind me, as if to raise the possibility that I was being followed. This was a joke but, also, not entirely a joke.

On top of a low-lying bookshelf were art works that fans had sent him, including a hand-painted piece reading "Free Mahmoud Khalil." ("We usually keep this one more hidden," he said, placing it behind a ceramic cup that the artist Nan Goldin had given him.) He sat with Deen on the living-room floor, and Abdalla served grapes—whole for the adults, mashed for the baby. Khalil was writing a memoir, drawing in part on the diaries he'd kept during his time in ICE detention; he handed me a box of the diaries and let me flip through them. "There's noise around me like a school cafeteria—Spanish, Hindi, broken English," he'd written in one entry. In another, the phrase "kangaroo court" was scrawled in English and Arabic.

Khalil is unfailingly polite, in a way that can come across as mannered, almost aloof. He has his master's degree from Columbia, but not a full-time job. "I spend time with my baby, and on calls with my lawyers," he said—it felt like a setup for a Borscht Belt joke for which he couldn't quite find the punch line. He also speaks publicly (on Twitch streams, onstage at South by Southwest), exhibiting what a politician might call consistent message discipline. And yet disciplined messengers do not always make for the most entertaining content. One afternoon, Khalil took a car to a small studio in the Flatiron district to tape an episode of "The Adam Friedland Show," an interview program that combines earnest leftism and absurdist cringe comedy. With Khalil, Friedland struggled to find a comedic angle. Before they started rolling, Khalil walked in with a "posse" of legal advisers, and Friedland deadpanned, "You've got more reps than Justin Bieber." Crickets. "This is gonna be our funniest episode ever."

When Khalil was a child, his paternal grandmother often told him the story of how, in 1948, she'd been forced out of Tiberias, in contemporary Israel, and had to walk forty miles to Syria. (On the way, she gave birth to Khalil's father in a tent.) Khalil's school, run by the U.N., was in the second-biggest Palestinian refugee camp in Damascus. He was bright and curious, but there weren't many books at home. His father, a welder, left school after sixth grade; his mother, a civil servant, didn't finish high school. "I had one uncle who was a poet, and he used to make me type up his poems," Khalil told me. "That, more than school, was how I really learned to read and write."

He turned sixteen in 2011, the year of the Arab Spring. Of all the despots in the region, the Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad was perhaps the most ruthless in crushing dissent. One day, Khalil's aunt was working at a nonprofit; the next, the office was raided and his aunt was sent to prison without explanation. Khalil and a few of his bravest friends engaged in small acts of resistance—spray-painting a pro-democracy slogan on a wall, saving a protest song on a burner phone—but they all understood the danger. "If the police catch you, you will be tortured or killed," Khalil said. "We all had our contingency plans: 'If they take me, run to my house and bury my computer in the yard.'"

A week after Khalil's eighteenth birthday, he heard that two of his friends, Ali and Bashar, had been arrested. "I thought, If they came for them, they will be coming for me next," he told me. He fled to Lebanon with twenty-five Syrian pounds—less than fifty cents—and ended up staying in Beirut for a decade. He taught himself French and English; he got a job with an aid organization, and then with the British Embassy. In 2016, he met a Syrian American college student—Abdalla—who was spending the summer volunteering in Beirut. After she returned to Michigan, he got a Canadian visa, and they met in Windsor, Ontario, on the banks of the Detroit River, where they sat in a Tim Hortons for hours. Abdalla, who was about to graduate from the University of Michigan-Flint, had been selected to be her class's commencement speaker, and they edited a draft of her speech together. "We are all so privileged to be living in a country such as this one," it read. "I'm safe to converse with my professors and have passionate talks . . . and I'm safe to dream big." Khalil became a Columbia student in 2023. Soon afterward, they drove to a courthouse in the Bronx, where they were married. A year later, Khalil got his green card.

The Assad regime fell in 2024, but the bodies of Khalil's two friends were never recovered; their families assumed that they had been tortured, killed, and buried in a mass grave. Life in Syria was untenably brutal, Khalil told me, "but at least we knew the risks. Nobody was gaslighting us, saying, 'This is a democracy.' Then you come here, and it's all so confusing." Trump did not have boundless dictatorial powers, yet it was not at all clear whether the institutions that were supposed to check his authoritarian instincts, such as Congress and the courts, were equal to the task. Still, Khalil continued, "there's this discourse of 'This is the greatest democracy on earth, where everyone's rights are guaranteed.'"

I was with Khalil during a series of life-altering moments, as he reacted to both propitious and disastrous news, but I never saw his poker face slip. This stolidity had its advantages. And yet, he noted, "I struggle to show my emotions, even to access my emotions," which made it difficult to write a memoir. (The book, "No Land to Stand On: Notes from Detention," comes out next month.) Recently, at a furniture store in Williamsburg, Abdalla and Khalil spotted a table that seemed perfect for their kitchen, but they were hesitant to buy it: by the time it got delivered, Khalil might be gone. "For Noor, this uncertainty is just too much," he said. "But my whole life has been uncertain."

Before dawn on April 17, 2024, dozens of student activists pitched tents, purchased in bulk on Amazon, on a lawn in the middle of Columbia's campus. They strung up Palestinian flags and hand-painted signs ("WHILE YOU READ, GAZA BLEEDS"). "We're calling it an occupation," one of them told me that morning, using the word with intentional irony—but other organizers called it an encampment, and that was the name that stuck. Khalil led a teach-in on the lawn, sitting cross-legged and facilitating a discussion about "apartheid" in Palestine. For years, it seemed to him, Palestine had been treated as a "side issue," but now the world was paying attention.

The university called in the N.Y.P.D., and officers arrested more than a hundred protesters. Students set up another encampment, on an adjacent lawn. Later, a few students took over Hamilton Hall, barricading themselves inside. This time, the N.Y.P.D. sent a tactical unit, which cleared the building using surveillance drones and a military-style armored vehicle.

Khalil wasn't part of the group that entered Hamilton Hall. "I wasn't even on board with that as a tactic," he told me. In the encampments, he acted as an organizer and as a go-between, communicating his fellow-protesters' demands to university administrators and relaying the administrators' responses. "I know how to speak bureaucrat," he said. A university administrator told me that Khalil, in contrast with some of the other student activists, was known as a levelheaded mediator.

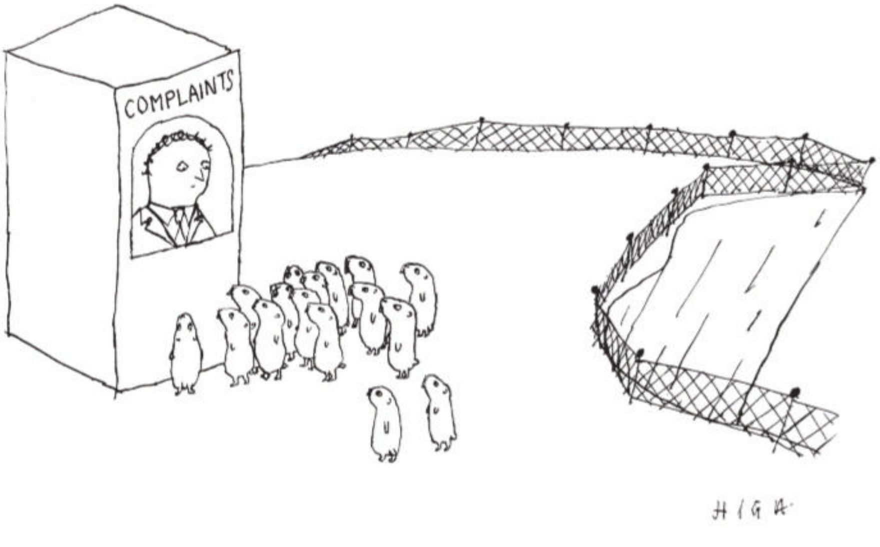
The student protesters called themselves anti-Zionist; their opponents accused them of antisemitism. When other Columbia students staged a counter-protest outside the encampment, holding Israeli flags, people threatened them with violence. Some visibly Jewish students, walking out of the campus gates, were heckled with shouts of "Go back to Poland!" (In both cases, it's not clear whether the perpetrators were students or outsiders.) In our conversations, Khalil distanced himself from these incidents. "There were some antisemitic things that happened, some unacceptable things," he said. At one point, someone from outside the encampment "came over and started shouting, 'Fuck the Jews,' and the person with the megaphone said, 'You don't represent us, go away.' "

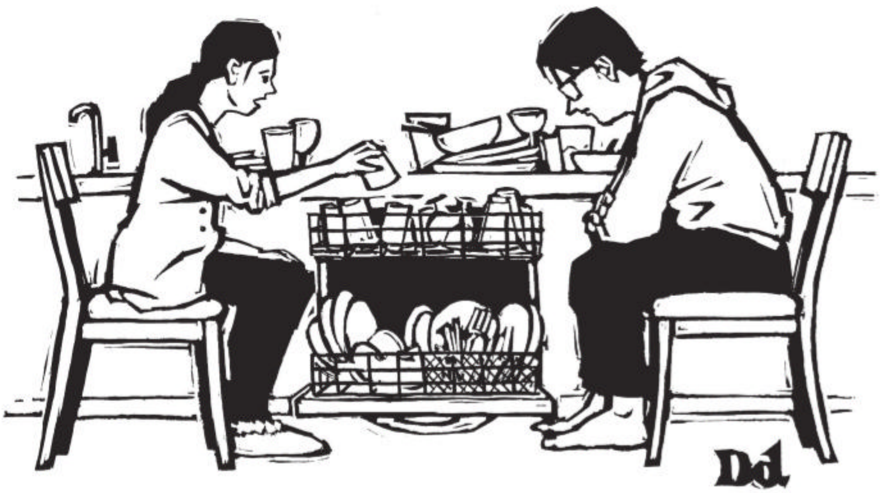
"Doxing trucks" circled the campus, photographing protesters and then publicly displaying their names. Two students had offers from white-shoe law firms rescinded; another student, who had been advertised as one of "Columbia's Leading Antisemites," sued the company that owned the doxing truck for defamation. Some protesters' photos were posted on Canary Mission, a website that purports to "document people and groups that promote hatred of the USA, Israel and Jews." A militant Zionist group called Betar, which is widely considered a hate group, compiled dossiers of student protesters (or "jihadis," as Betar referred to them). Khalil and his friends treated such exposure as a badge of honor. "Our joke was 'Canary Mission is our dating app,' " he said. "You weren't really a part of the movement unless you had a Canary Mission profile."

Meanwhile, unbeknownst to them, the Heritage Foundation, a right-wing think tank, was working on a report called "Project Esther: A National Strategy to Combat Antisemitism." The report—published on October 7, 2024—said that "the so-called pro-Palestinian movement" was actually "part of a highly organized, global Hamas Support Network (HSN) and therefore effectively a terrorist support network." Referencing Canary Mission, the report enumerated several goals, including getting anti-Israel protesters "deported from the U.S." At the time, this seemed like bluster.

Then Trump was reëlected. "Under Biden, we were pushing a giant boulder up a steep hill," Ross Glick, who was then the director of Betar's U.S. chapter, told me. Now, suddenly, "we had friends in the White House"—and also in "the Justice Department, F.B.I., D.H.S." Under previous Administrations, Betar had been treated as a fringe group; now it apparently enjoyed access to the offices of some of the most powerful figures in the executive branch, including Rubio and Miller. Glick and his colleagues lobbied officials to pursue the objectives of Project Esther, although "it didn't take much convincing," Glick said. "Do you know the expression 'preaching to the choir'?" Betar even furnished lists of names, suggesting "enemies of the US" whom the government should deport.

The New York Attorney General investigated Betar and found that it had targeted Muslim and Jewish New Yorkers with threats and harassment; as part of a settlement, the organization agreed to cease its operations in the state. By then, Glick was no longer working at Betar. (Years earlier, he had pleaded guilty to harassing an ex-girlfriend.) In response to inquiries from *The New Yorker*, a spokesperson from the Department of Homeland





"Small juice glass from side rack to space c7."

Security wrote, "Any suggestion that the United States would take action against a terrorist sympathizer simply because it was told to is not only ridiculous but FALSE." A White House spokesperson wrote, "Allegations that officials from Betar had a direct line to the White House through Stephen Miller are FALSE. He has not even heard of this group." But I reviewed previously undisclosed e-mails in which Lew Olowski, who has served as a senior adviser to Rubio, treated one of Betar's lists as a spur to government action, asking, "What's the timeline for . . . revoking the visas of Hamas activists?" Less than two weeks later, Olowski prodded again, adding that he owed "an update on our progress." In response, another State Department staffer noted that the list appeared to have been "provided to Secretary Rubio's office" and "sent to . . . Stephen Miller." (Olowski did not respond to a request for comment; a State Department spokesperson said, "We stand by our decisions to revoke visas from individuals who seek to undermine America and hate what it stands for.")

Khalil was on at least one of Betar's lists, incorrectly identified as a "student visa holder." On March 5, 2025, he went to another protest at Columbia, and footage of his unmasked face ricocheted around social media. "🚨 SUSPECTED FOREIGN NATIONAL ALERT 🚨," Canary Mission posted. Shai Davidai, an Israeli professor who was then at Columbia, tagged Rubio, writing, "Distributing terrorist propaganda should be a deportable offense, no?"

Two days later, Khalil and Abdalla were in Morningside Heights, walking home from a dinner breaking the day's Ramadan fast. When they opened the door to their apartment building, two large men wearing plain clothes followed them inside. Two more men—federal agents, apparently, though they would identify themselves only as "police"—were waiting in the lobby. They claimed that Khalil's student visa had been revoked. "I don't have a student visa," he replied. "I'm on a green card." This confused the agents for a moment, but then one of them made a phone call, and they proceeded to arrest Khalil anyway. ("They wouldn't say who they were talking to, but it was clearly someone high up," Abdalla told me.) They handcuffed Khalil and frog-marched him across the street to an unmarked S.U.V. Abdalla, who was eight months pregnant, followed them outside, tearful and short of breath, and asked why Khalil was being taken. The men drove off without answering. For more than twenty-four hours, no one could tell her where her husband was.

Khalil was booked in lower Manhattan and led to a crowded, brightly lit room, where he was told to sleep on the floor. In the early morning, he was taken to a detention center in New Jersey for a few hours; from there, he was driven to John F. Kennedy International Airport. "They walked me inside with shackles on, surrounded by guards, like I was Pablo Escobar," he told me. "I had no idea where we were going. I saw 'LA' and thought it was Los Angeles." The agent sitting next to him on the plane also seemed confused. "I saw over his shoulder that he was Googling me, trying to figure out why this was a big deal." They landed in Dallas, and, while they waited for a connecting flight to Louisiana, the sun went down, ending the daily fast. The guards took Khalil to a Wendy's in the airport and bought him a cheeseburger.

If it's true, as Learned Hand said, that unrationed justice is a prerequisite for democracy, then the U.S. has never been a full democracy. American Presidents have a long history of acting unlawfully, and American courts have a long history of letting them get away with it, especially when they can muster a rationale that has something to do with national security. In 1942, under Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a hundred thousand people "of Japanese extraction," most of them American citizens, were forced into military internment camps. At the time, despite the fog of war, many commentators could see the grim irony: it's hard to claim the moral high ground in a war against Fascism while rounding up racial minorities at home and locking them in camps.

Nevertheless, things got more perfect, or less glaringly imperfect. Politicians stoked the anti-Communist fervor of the nineteen-fifties, but, by the end of the decade, the courts had reined in the executive branch somewhat, declaring many of the overreaches of the previous twenty years illegal. Presidents kept trying to bend or break the rules, and they often got away with it. The George W. Bush Administration used warrantless wiretaps to spy on a wide swath of Americans; the Barack Obama Administration pursued whistle-blowers with surprising zeal. When these Presidents were checked by the other branches, though, they at least appeared to be chastened.

But Trump, especially in his second term, knows only how to double down. First, he decides who his enemies are, and how they are to be afflicted; later, his underlings come up with post-hoc justifications that might hold up in court. Perhaps the Administration's most concerted effort to suppress disobedient speech has been its ongoing pressure campaign against universities, which it has carried out through lawsuits, investigations, and other tactics—some lawful, some unlawful, and some that inhabit a legal gray area. In a settlement with the federal government, Columbia agreed to pay more than two hundred million dollars and to insure that "all students, international and domestic, are committed to the longstanding traditions of American universities."

In 2024, Rümeysa Öztürk, a Turkish Ph.D. candidate on a student visa, co-wrote an eight-paragraph op-ed in the *Tufts Daily*. In a subdued tone, it accused Israel of "clear violations of international law." In February, 2025, Canary Mission created a profile for Öztürk; it accused her of "anti-Israel activism," citing only the op-ed. The following month, D.H.S. ordered her arrest. Öztürk was walking through a quiet residential neighborhood in Somerville, Massachusetts, at around five in the evening, when masked plainclothes agents snatched her off the sidewalk and stuffed her into a van. "Is this a kidnapping?" one of her neighbors asked. Betar posted footage on X, gloating, "She was on our list." Later, in court, an ICE agent testified that higher-ups had ordered him to fast-track Öztürk's arrest and added, "I can't recall a time that it's come top down like this."

The government revoked Öztürk's visa and tried to deport her, asserting that her actions indicated "support for a designated terrorist organization," but an immigration judge ruled that the government had failed to meet its burden of proof. Trump's D.O.J. then fired that immigration judge—a clear act of interference in a nominally independent court—and appealed. (Last month, a group of U.N. experts denounced "the mass arbitrary removal of immigration judges and continued politicisation of immigration courts in the United States.") Öztürk, meanwhile, got her Ph.D., in child development, and moved back to Turkey.

According to the testimony of an ICE official named Peter Hatch, of roughly five thousand pro-Palestine students that Canary Mission and Betar reported to the government, ICE apparently investigated some two hundred as potential targets for arrest or deportation. A smaller fraction of these resulted in the cases against Khalil and Öztürk, and a handful of other pro-Palestine protesters. The government doesn't have to win these cases for them to have an effect. The Heritage report suggested that making an example of pro-Palestine protesters could instill "fear" in other "potential demonstrators," deterring future anti-Israel activism. In a paper published last November, the American Association of University Professors and the Middle East Studies Association argued that some of this had already happened: "Antisemitism investigations are producing a new system of government surveillance and monitoring of campus speech."

Some of Trump's attempts to flout constitutional limits are consistent with recent American history, but others are not. To find a precedent for them, you'd have to go back to 1832, when Chief Justice John Marshall wrote an opinion that displeased President Andrew Jackson. In response, Jackson said, or is said to have said, "John Marshall has made his decision; now let him enforce it." In other words, the executive and the judiciary are supposed to be coequal branches, but the executive is the one with the guns. This is generally understood as a parable about the fragility of liberal democracy—the thin line between the rule of law and the law of the jungle. But in 2022, on a far-right podcast, a senatorial candidate from Ohio quoted Jackson's quip approvingly, citing it as a model for "what Trump should do." That senatorial candidate, J. D. Vance, is now the Vice-President.

Such backsliding has shocked even the human-rights lawyers who already had reason to be disillusioned. Baher Azmy, the legal director at the Center for Constitutional Rights, spent years defending detainees at Guantánamo Bay. "We lost a lot," he recalled, of those cases. But when there was clear evidence that the government had violated someone's fundamental rights, "you could still put that in front of judges, including the most hardened conservatives, and you could get a fair hearing." Now, Azmy fears, the bad old days of Guantánamo are starting to seem like the good old days. He is one of the main lawyers on Khalil's team. "The case against Mahmoud is nothing but an authoritarian diktat," Azmy said. " 'We don't like what you have to say, so we are going to use the full weight of the federal government to make you leave.' " Referring to Egypt, where he was born, Azmy continued, "I used to say how lucky I was that I didn't have to be a lawyer there, that I got to live and work in a country where the rule of law meant something. And now it feels like, 'Look, Ma, I'm a lawyer in Egypt after all.' "

In February, Khalil was wearing his best suit, carrying a flat white in a to-go cup, and walking briskly through the underground tunnels in the U.S. Capitol. He was in Washington for three days, meeting privately with more than a dozen lawmakers, and, as usual, he was running late. He was flanked by one of his lawyers and by advocates from the Center for Constitutional Rights and another progressive organization, Jewish Voice for Peace. The group spotted Randy Fine, a Republican congressman from Florida, and gave him a wide berth. Fine has repeatedly called for Khalil to be deported; he has also voiced the opinion that "the Palestinian cause is evil" and that "the choice between dogs and Muslims is not a difficult one." Why avoid a confrontation with Fine, I asked, when they could film it and go viral? "I've had enough viral moments for a lifetime," Khalil said.

The group reached the office of Ilhan Omar, a Democratic congresswoman from Minneapolis who has a reputation as a political pugilist. At the moment, though, she mostly looked tired. Recently, D.H.S. agents in Minneapolis had shot and killed a protester, Renee Good, and then another, Alex Pretti. "They took a *five*-year-old in my district," Omar said, in a low, shaky voice. "They're just heartless."

The higher Khalil got on the rungs of congressional seniority, the more circumspect the lawmakers sounded. The No. 2 House Democrat, Katherine Clark, has a palatial office in the heart of the Capitol, with crystal chandeliers and mirrors in gilded frames. "We love our progressive members with our whole heart and soul," Clark said, diplomatically. "But I wonder if you've reached out to our more pro-Israel members—someone who may say, 'You know, we might disagree on this particular issue, but this is about a higher principle.'"

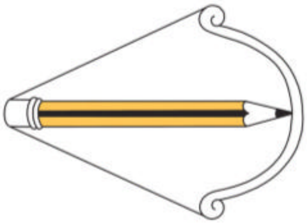
"I'd be happy to come down and meet with anyone," Khalil said. "So far, we haven't seen much interest."

When the group had downtime between meetings, they relaxed in the office of Representative Rashida Tlaib, from Detroit, whose walls were decorated with a greatest-hits lineup of good-trouble posters (Rosa Parks, Shirley Chisholm, Nelson Mandela wearing a kaffiyeh), plus a more recent addition: "Free Mahmoud Khalil." If other leftist representatives acted like Khalil's friends, then Tlaib, the only Palestinian member of Congress, treated him like a favorite nephew. "Our elders will tell us, 'Be quiet, don't get in trouble,'" Tlaib said, in her sonorous Michigan accent. "To this day, my mother says this to me. I'm, like, 'Mom, it's too late! I'm in Congress!'"

Tlaib asked for updates on Khalil's case. After he was arrested, D.H.S. issued a statement declaring, in language reminiscent of the Project Esther report, that he had "led activities aligned to Hamas, a designated terrorist organization." Various Administration spokespeople repeated this accusation, but, in its many court filings against Khalil, the government never alleged that he had incited violence, materially supported terrorism, or committed any other crime. (While Khalil was in ICE detention, the government provided an additional justification for his removal, claiming that he had omitted relevant information from his green-card application.) Khalil's fellow-activists had chanted "Globalize the intifada" and "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free." Khalil, in one of his more controversial statements, said that "Palestinians have tried multiple forms of resistance," including "armed resistance, which is legitimate under international law." These views are contentious; some take them to be inherently threatening. But almost no one doubts that they are protected by the First Amendment. (In his memo, Rubio confirmed that the "beliefs" and "statements" for which Khalil had been arrested "are otherwise lawful.") Even if Khalil had openly espoused antisemitic beliefs or walked around campus draped in a Hamas flag, his behavior, though it would have been abhorrent and potential grounds for expulsion from Columbia, wouldn't have been illegal.

In our interviews, I asked Khalil to clarify what he thinks of Hamas. He resents the question—he doesn't see why he should be grilled on this any more than someone who protests the war in Iran should be made to answer for the crimes of the Khamenei regime—but, when pressed, he said that Hamas's leaders, like all leaders, should be held accountable for any war crimes they've committed, against both Israelis and Palestinians. He had no kind words for Fatah, or for the Palestinian Authority, or for any other Palestinian political party. "Political factions usually work for their own survival, not for the good of the people," he said. Anyone who has ever spoken to a Palestinian would find most of Khalil's political opinions unremarkable. "I want to live long enough to see a safe and free homeland for my people, and I want to be allowed to visit my grandmother's village once before I die," he said.

When Rubio determined that Khalil could be deported, he was relying on an obscure and broadly worded provision of immigration law that enables the Secretary of State to single out any noncitizen whose presence in the country could have "adverse foreign policy consequences." (In 1996, a federal judge found the provision unconstitutional—coincidentally, the judge was Maryanne Trump Barry, Donald Trump's late sister—but her decision is not considered binding.) The provision has been invoked only rarely—for example, in 1995, after Mario Ruiz Massieu, a Mexican public official suspected of money laundering, was apprehended in the U.S. But Rubio's memo stretched the law beyond recognition. He maintained that Khalil had participated in protests that fostered "a hostile environment for Jewish students"; his continued presence in the country, therefore, would compromise "core American interests," specifically the objective of combatting antisemitism.



According to some commentators, none of this should be controversial. "Every country has the power to control who enters," Ilya Shapiro, a constitutional scholar at the Manhattan Institute, a conservative think tank, told me. "In this country, that includes ideological screenings—you can't be a Nazi, you can't be a Communist, you can't be toxic to the body politic." If Khalil is ejected for ideological reasons, Shapiro continued, then "that's an immigration issue, not a free-speech issue. Congress could change immigration law, but this government is following it as it's written." Ross Glick, the former Betar official, told me, "You're not allowed to yell 'fire' in a crowded theatre, but you can stand in the middle of a campus shouting, 'Globalize the intifada,' which is a call for violence against Jews? No. Fuck you. Get out of this country."

But many experts argue the opposite: that it's a textbook violation of the First Amendment for the government to punish anyone, citizen or not, as payback for political speech. "This is an Administration that seems to believe the President can do anything," Melissa Murray, a law professor at N.Y.U. and a progressive legal commentator, said. But even assuming that a vaguely worded statute gives the State Department the power to revoke visas at its discretion, she continued, "they still can't do it in ways that contravene constitutional protections, like freedom of speech or freedom from discrimination. And those are protections that do apply to green-card holders"—or, at least, they have until now. When Biden was President, conservatives lambasted him for his purported eagerness to turn campuses into "safe spaces" by stifling free expression. How would they have reacted if he'd singled out a student whose political views he disliked—an anti-trans activist, say, who happened to be in the U.S. on a green card—and then used every lever of governmental power to get that student deported?

When Khalil or his lawyers were asked about his potential removal from the country, they tended to respond, at least on the record, with an optimistic hedge: there was no constitutional reason for him to be deported. Even so, I said, it could happen. The government could put him on a plane to Algeria, where he holds citizenship through his mother's family; it could force him to go to Syria or Lebanon, where his life might be in danger; it could even send him to a "third country," such as Rwanda or South Sudan, as it has done to other detainees. I was reluctant to press the point during my first few visits with Khalil and Abdalla, but eventually I asked them outright: If the government did send him away, what was the plan? Would Abdalla and Deen go with him, or would he go alone?

For a moment, fear seemed to flash across Abdalla's face. For all their worrying, apparently, they hadn't yet talked through specific scenarios. But Khalil's smile didn't waver. "It's too early to talk about these things," he said.

"They wouldn't deport me, right?" Abdalla said, turning to Khalil. "Could they?"

"*Habibi*, no," Khalil said, rubbing her back. "You're American."

"My greatest weakness? Arson."

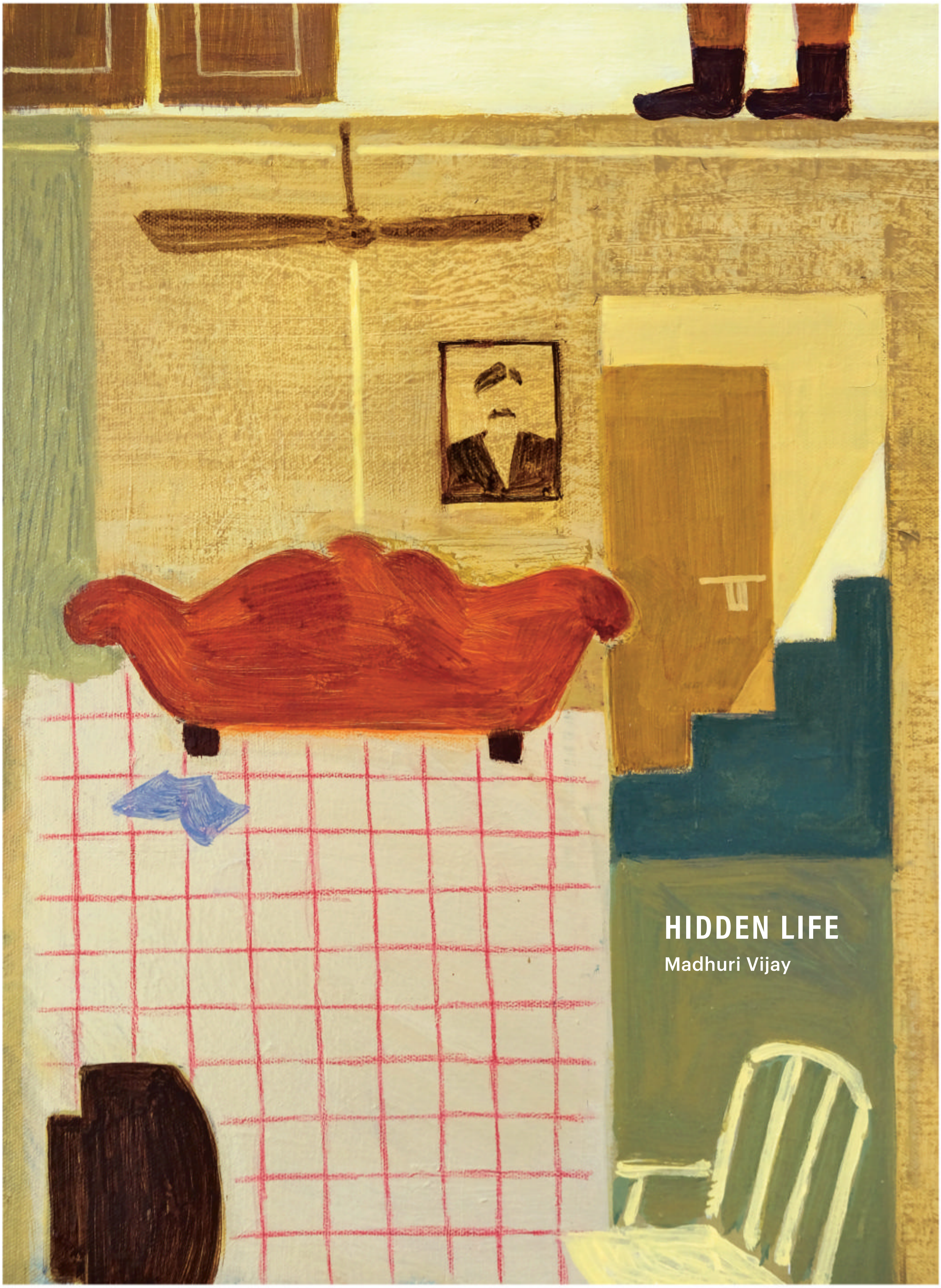
The day the Third Circuit opinion came down, making Khalil vulnerable to deportation again, I went to see him and Abdalla at their apartment. "Tonight's supposed to be our date night," Abdalla told me. But now, Khalil said, his lawyers were "e-mailing D.H.S. to get clarification—to make sure it's still O.K. for me to leave the house." At the end of the day, the lawyers still hadn't heard back, so they advised Khalil and Abdalla to cancel their date and stay inside.

Once again, Khalil was making contingency plans. "I've got a special phone, with a bunch of numbers preloaded," he told me. If he was out somewhere, and ICE agents ambushed him, "I can press one button, in my pocket, and Noor and all the lawyers will be notified." He had been in the habit of taking Deen out for a daily walk, just the two of them. He stopped doing that, haunted by the image of an officer handcuffing him and taking him away, leaving his baby alone in a stroller in the middle of Prospect Park.

In April, the Board of Immigration Appeals issued its final decision, rejecting all Khalil's arguments and approving his deportation. "Normally, a case like this would take years," Homero López, a former immigration appeals judge, told me. "They had this ready to go within days, which, to me, suggests engagement from the White House." Khalil's lawyers moved to reopen the case, citing this and other irregularities, but their motion was denied. They are currently planning to appeal to the Supreme Court. Khalil and his lawyers worry that if the Court agrees to hear his case it could issue an opinion that further curtails the speech rights of immigrants, or of all Americans. But if it doesn't take the case Khalil may be out of options, at which point he would have to leave the country.

This spring, Aziz Huq, a law professor at the University of Chicago, gave a lecture describing a sudden "phase shift in the way the law operates in the United States"—from "standard liberal legality" to something harsher and dangerously capricious. He discussed several active cases, including Khalil's, arguing that they indicated the emergence of an American "dual state." Huq was borrowing the term from Ernst Fraenkel, a German Jew who practiced law in Berlin until he fled, in 1938; he ended up in Chicago, where he completed a book called "The Dual State: A Contribution to the Theory of Dictatorship." According to Fraenkel, authoritarian regimes dispense justice on two parallel tracks: "normative" legal protections for loyal subjects of the state, and "unchecked arbitrariness" for its enemies. (Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson cited the book in one of her recent opinions—a dissent, naturally.) By making the comparison, Huq told me, he wasn't saying that every enemy of the American state would be sent to a concentration camp. "There are echoes, but they're partial echoes," he said.

Last month, I visited Khalil at home one more time. Deen, now more than a year old, sat in Abdalla's lap as she read him a picture book called "Who's Hiding on the Farm?" Khalil was still in a state of bureaucratic superposition: the Board of Immigration Appeals had issued a final order of removal, yet, technically, until all his legal challenges were resolved, the government was not supposed to remove him. But what if it did? The government wasn't supposed to invade Venezuela and kidnap its President, Nicolás Maduro. But it had, and now Maduro was in Brooklyn, not four miles from Khalil's apartment, in a jail known for its maggot-infested food. As a condition of Khalil's bail, the government already knew where he lived. What if ICE agents were to stake out his address and apprehend him on sight? What was stopping them? Norms? Pieces of paper? "We're a superpower," Stephen Miller said in January, "and under President Trump we're going to conduct ourselves as a superpower." If officials decided it was in their interest, they could act now and ask for forgiveness later. "My lawyers keep giving me these refreshers, these 'know your rights' trainings," Khalil told me. "I ask—they hate it when I say this, but I can't help myself—'What if I know my rights, and the government knows my rights, but they just don't care?'" ♦



HIDDEN LIFE

Madhuri Vijay

ILLUSTRATION BY RICHA KASHELKAR

When Nidhi was fourteen, her mother became pregnant again. People were understandably surprised, no one more so, it seemed, than her own parents. They made their usual jokes, both about the pregnancy and about the deed that had produced it.

Her mother: "If we'd known, we'd have put some *drama* into the sex, yaar. Now this poor kid will grow up and become a banker or some other boring thing."

Her father, all innocent astonishment: "I woke up to go the bathroom, that's it. Must have made a wrong turn on the way back."

They made these jokes in front of Nidhi, who was unembarrassed by them. Her parents had always spoken like this. It was not that they were crass, exactly. They just didn't see the use in shielding her from things. Like the man who sold vegetables from a handcart when Nidhi was six. His produce looked fresh, as far as Nidhi could tell, but her mother nevertheless waved him on. One day, she said, "Watch. He's going to touch his testicles now." Nidhi saw the man's hand slide down into his trousers, saw the furtive fondling. When he reached their house, he picked up a tomato with the same hand and held it out to them, a glossy enticement.

•

Other parents, Nidhi was aware, did not say "testicles" to their children. Other parents had special words for such things, pert and whimsical. Urine was "soo-soo" or "chi-chi." Feces were "caca." Vaginas were usually "flowers" or "buds." (What penises were called, Nidhi wasn't sure.) Having sex was "getting close" or, confusingly, "friendship." Nidhi's neighbor Payal had a cocker spaniel named Lucy, who regularly dripped spots of blood onto the driveway. Payal's family called this, and all menstruation, "Lucy's problem."

But Nidhi did not resent her parents' frankness. It was an unremarkable fact, like her father's lazy eye, or the aerobics classes for local women that her mother, a former Bharatanatyam dancer, taught on their terrace—and continued to teach even as her pregnancy progressed. Each morning, while Nidhi ate breakfast, these women would troop cheerfully into the house in socked feet, Keds hooked to their fingers, calling out, "Good morning, big sister!" and laughing as they climbed the stairs to the terrace, where Nidhi's mother was already laying out their steps and dumbbells.

•

Then, on a Tuesday, sixteen weeks into her term, Nidhi's mother phoned her students to ask them not to come; she was feeling tired. Nidhi's father drove her to a clinic. By the time Nidhi got home from school, her mother had locked herself into her bedroom, and Nidhi was an only child again.

"Give her a few days," her father said.

But a few days did not help. Nidhi's mother stayed in her bedroom, and, for once, her father would not reveal what went on inside that place, from which only unfathomable sounds now emerged: low booms; yipping cries; vast, tomblike silences.

What her father *did* say, eventually, was that it might be best if Nidhi stayed somewhere else for a while. With whom? A friend? Nidhi could not imagine spending more than a night or two at her friends' houses. The idea of looking so deeply into their lives, or having them look into hers, disturbed her.

No, not a friend, her father said. Not even in Bangalore. His maternal aunt—Nidhi's great-aunt—lived in Madras (or Chennai, as it had become only a few years ago). Her name was Jaya. She was the oldest of his mother's five siblings, and she had a house with a huge garden, perfect for exploring. And the best part? The house was *chock*-full of books. He'd stayed there himself for a week, in fact, when he was fifteen and his brother had fallen ill with chicken pox. He remembered that week being pure heaven. He was sure that Nidhi would feel the same.

So sure, it turned out, that he'd already called Jaya Aunty, who had said that Nidhi was welcome to stay as long as needed.

"And how long will that be?" Nidhi asked.

"Oh, sweetheart." Her father sighed. "Trust me. You don't want to see her this way."

•

Three days later, he and Nidhi waited on the platform at Cantonment Station for the Brindavan Express. Nidhi was wearing her favorite denim shorts, the ones with the patch pockets. Once the train arrived in Madras, she was expected to catch an auto to Jaya Aunty's house, in a neighborhood called Adyar. (Apparently, there was no question of being met at the station.) A family nearby, on hearing that she was travelling alone, offered to keep an eye on her.

Her father thanked them. Then he turned to Nidhi. "By the way, you should know about Padmini," he said. "She's Jaya's daughter-in-law. She's retarded."

He spoke in his old, easy manner. Even the word "retarded," which Nidhi would soon learn to expunge from her vocabulary, he made free of shadows. "She'll be in her mid-forties now. But, mentally, you'll find her closer to ten or eleven, I'd say."

"She's married?"

"She's a widow. Jaya's son—Shankar, my cousin—died before he was thirty. From what I've heard, he married Padmini without knowing about her. Her condition, I mean. Her family kept it secret. Nobody realized until after the wedding, but, before anything could be done, Shankar died. He died somewhere in Africa, if I recall. Mozambique, maybe? Anyway, my family always said that Shankar was a genius. The kind of fellow who could read a book once and memorize it."

"What about her?" Nidhi persisted. "She stayed? Even after he died?"

"Padmini?" Her father sounded surprised. "Well, yes. Jaya could've sent her back to her family, I suppose, but they'd pulled a pretty dirty trick to marry her off. Who knows what they'd have done if they'd gotten her back?"

Nidhi was silent. She and her father watched the dusty old train pull in.

Her father said, "It felt like having a younger sister for a while. Back when I stayed there." He smiled sadly at Nidhi. "Maybe it'll be the same for you."

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Jaya Aunty did not offer to help with Nidhi's suitcase. She was also of the opinion that Nidhi had not drunk enough apple juice in her life. She murmured, looking at Nidhi's legs, "Apple juice is good for the skin. Your father drank lots of apple juice when he stayed here."

Nidhi glanced at her legs. They

MY BEST FRIEND...
THE GUY WHO GAVE ME A HOT DOG ONCE...
T. SIEGEL + D. KIRKWOOD

appeared fine to her, strong and lithe and chicory brown.

"That's why your father's complexion is so nice," Jaya Aunty went on. "Apple juice. But your mother, I think, is not so fair?"

"She's fairer than my father," Nidhi pointed out. She would soon learn not to do this.

"Is that so?" Jaya Aunty was a tall woman with sloping, mannish shoulders. Her sari—royal-purple silk stitched with miniature golden birds—hung straight down without any visible deviation in service to hips or buttocks. Her scant hair was pulled taut across her scalp, like violin strings.

This conversation was taking place in Jaya Aunty's living room, and Nidhi's eyes kept darting about. There was something wrong with the room, she thought. With its proportions or its arrangement. At the far end, which seemed miles away, a blocky television sat before a lone white plastic chair. Where she and her great-aunt stood, by the front door, an ornate rosewood sofa hunkered, its ugly orange upholstery embalmed in thick plastic. The long middle of the room was completely empty. Looking at it gave Nidhi a queasy feeling, as if the floor there could not be trusted.

"It's good to be fit," Jaya Aunty declared. "But fitness comes from doing daily work. If you are not fit, it means you are not doing enough work, and so you touch your toes and kick your legs like a donkey, and things get mixed up inside."

A moment of bewilderment, and then Nidhi understood. Jaya Aunty was talking about the aerobics classes. She was saying that Nidhi's mother had lost the baby because of the aerobics classes, because she had kicked her legs like a donkey and things had gotten mixed up.

Nidhi imagined the baby crawling around in her mother's body, desperately seeking the uterus, and, failing to find it in its proper place, quietly shrivelling up and dying. It was ridiculous, she knew, but she made no effort to suppress the image. It gave her the same feeling as the room's empty middle, a flash of something dirty and hidden. Suddenly, her parents' cheerful transparency—their coarse jokes, their eagerness to name things that should not be named—appeared to Nidhi in a faintly embarrassing light.

She said, "Thank you for letting me stay here."

"Well." Jaya Aunty shrugged. "Your father made it sound like an emergency."

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Nidhi's room was off the kitchen and, judging by the faint odor of gunnysacks, had once been a storeroom. Tiny and windowless, it reminded her of a room, belonging to a famous artist, that was described in a novel she'd read: a single cot, a chair, a standing fan. She loved it immediately. Jaya Aunty slept in a much larger room on the other side of the house. It had windows lining one wall, cupboards lining the other, and two single cots. And that was when Nidhi remembered Padmini, whom she had still not seen.

Padmini came in about ten minutes later, carrying a net bag bulging with okra and shiny gourds. Her hair was gray—somehow a surprise—and tied in a low bun. She wore a boxy cotton blouse and an ankle-length pavadai-style skirt, the kind that Nidhi had stopped wearing years earlier. Her hips were wide, her shoulders slender and curved. Her face, indisputably middle-aged, had a pensive, startled quality. When she caught sight of Nidhi, who was unpacking in her room, she stopped short.

"Hi," Nidhi said.

Padmini smiled, though this appeared more reflex than friendliness. Perhaps she'd forgotten about Nidhi's arrival, or perhaps Jaya Aunty had not bothered to warn her about it. (Having now met her great-aunt, Nidhi felt that this was entirely possible.) Padmini did not respond to the greeting and vanished into the kitchen. Only then did it occur to Nidhi that she might be mute.

•

It took Nidhi a few days to piece together her new situation. Padmini, she discovered, did not only the shopping and the cooking but everything else, too. She washed clothes and hung them on the clothesline in the overgrown garden behind the house. She pounded spices in a mortar the size of Nidhi's head. She scoured copper vessels with lime halves dipped in salt. She shelled peas, kneaded dough, picked stones from dal. The only things she did not do were sweep and mop. A young woman named Ambika came in daily to do these, and she did them with so much grumbling and ill will that Nidhi guiltily wished that Padmini would just take care of them herself.

For Padmini did not seem to mind all the work she had to do. It would be an exaggeration to say that she enjoyed it, but it left no mark upon her. For days, Nidhi observed her for signs of secret despair but could detect none. While she was carrying out a task, Padmini was unflagging, methodical, focussed, capable. She was *not*, however, mute. As she grew used to Nidhi, she became fairly talkative in her presence. Her conversation consisted primarily of declarations, some more enigmatic than others.

"The ping-ping lady didn't come today," she might say, deftly peeling a carrot.

Or: "Give me your half pants. I'll wash them."

Or: "I have to put the dirty things into the hot place."

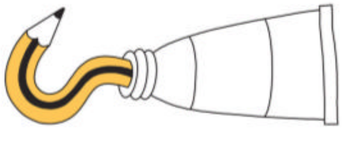
The first two were easy enough to follow. The ping-ping lady was Ambika, who wore many jangly bangles. "Half pants" were Nidhi's denim shorts. But the business about dirty things in the hot place remained a mystery. In the beginning, Nidhi tried to decipher Padmini's more obscure assertions, but, in this one regard, Padmini resembled Jaya Aunty: she did not like being questioned. She would fall into a sulky silence, and Nidhi eventually gave up. Still, Padmini was every bit as kind as her father had promised. She made sure that Nidhi's clothes were perfectly folded, saved her the cream from the curd, which Nidhi loved to eat sprinkled with sugar, and surprised her with boiled groundnuts, to go with her evening cup of tea.

While Padmini worked, Jaya Aunty sat in the plastic chair in the living room and watched TV. It was all she appeared to do. She was a restless viewer, changing channels a dozen times within minutes. The resulting stream of clips—"Baywatch," a Hindi soap, the Tamil news, "Baywatch" again—was so disorienting that Nidhi tended to avoid her, preferring Padmini's company instead.

Padmini, too, was uninterested in TV. She did not linger to watch when she walked through the living room with an armful of clothes, nor did her gaze steal to the screen as she sat on the sofa, trimming green beans with a paring knife. But this, Nidhi conceded, was perhaps the result of a need to concentrate, since any oversight in her work earned Jaya Aunty's prompt disapproval. Things had to be done a certain way in that house. Once, when the curd did not set, Jaya Aunty did not do what Nidhi's mother would have done—namely, shrug her shoulders and nip out to the store for a couple of squishy packets. Instead, she sniffed at the sour, runny stuff, then ostentatiously poured it over her rice, mixed it with her fingers, and ate it with stiff dignity, like an old emperor in exile.

•

Nidhi was not unhappy in Madras, but she was soon bored. Her boredom was sharpened by the discovery that most of her initial assumptions were wrong. Her room, which had seemed so romantic, became unbearably hot each evening. The garden, so promising and Kipling-like at first glance, was, in fact, a place of grim neglect, filled with long, sharp-edged grass that made Nidhi's ankles swell; plus, she was sure she'd once seen a small brown snake flashing into a hole. (Padmini showed no fear, going barefoot into the garden each afternoon to hang clothes.) But Nidhi's worst mistake of all was not having packed a single book. Given what her father had said, she had expected to find a veritable library at Jaya Aunty's house, but after a week she had not seen anything between two covers except for the *Rani* magazines that came by post, which she could not read because they were in Tamil. Had her father misremembered? Had the books ever existed? Likely, Nidhi reasoned, they'd belonged not to Jaya Aunty but to her genius son, and, after his death, they'd been given away. This suspicion was strengthened when she asked Padmini about them one day.



"Books?" Padmini echoed. Then she pointed a finger heavenward.

•

Madras was on the coast, yet Nidhi had not laid eyes on the beach. When she mentioned the possibility of an outing, Jaya Aunty murmured, "Ah, the beach. A girl's body was found on Marina Beach last month. She was . . . exposed." "Exposed" was spoken with a regretful glance at Nidhi's shorts.

Consequently, Nidhi found herself moping around the house, sweating, flipping through the unintelligible pages of *Rani*, listening to Padmini's pleasant, purling talk. She thought about begging her father to let her return to Bangalore, but he would inevitably ask why, and she did not want to lie and claim that what was merely tedious was unbearable. He called the house every other day, and, when she assured him that she was fine, his relief was palpable. When Nidhi asked after her mother, he just said, "We'll see."

•

A week into her visit, something happened. Nidhi was sitting on the plastic-covered sofa, drawing her legs up so that Ambika could sweep underneath, and Padmini was in the kitchen. That was when Jaya Aunty farted in her white chair. A long, terrible, gurgling discharge. She did not turn her head or apologize. On the screen, two men in white shorts were playing tennis. Nidhi and Ambika looked at each other, then looked away.

Until now, Ambika had demonstrated exactly no interest in Nidhi, but she seemed to feel that this incident had united them. Later, when Nidhi was in her room, Ambika sidled up and whispered, "Dirty old camel, isn't she?"

"Who?" Nidhi asked disingenuously.

"And the other one." Ambika tutted with lazy, luxurious spite. "I know I shouldn't speak badly about people like that. God made them, same as you and me. I'm just saying—you can understand why the husband ran off."

"I thought he died," Nidhi said.

"All men have the *feeling*, you know." Ambika regarded Nidhi sternly, as if she were being difficult. "If they can't show it at home, what can they do? They have to go somewhere else, no?"

"Have you finished your work?" Nidhi asked politely.

"Everything but the terrace room." Ambika flicked a defensive glance at the ceiling. "But it's not my fault. He locks the door and takes the key. Does he think I can walk through walls?"

This time, Nidhi really had no idea what she was talking about.

"The professor. Oh, right, you don't know him. He was a friend of *her* son. Says he's from Africa, but I've heard that everyone in Africa has black skin, and he just looks like a normal Indian to me. He comes here every few months."

"Does he stay in my room?"

"The storeroom?" Ambika looked offended. "No, he stays upstairs. It's the only room with A.C. Whenever he's here, I try to sweep inside as long as possible—it's so nice and cool—but he always sends me away. Says I disturb his reading."

"Reading?" Nidhi's head shot up. "You mean books?"

"What else? He's got hundreds up there. The maharaja of books, that's what I call him."

•

Nidhi had not paid much attention to the little room on the terrace, but now she went up to examine it. Months of dust lined the doorjamb, and the dead bolt was dull, but the padlock hanging from it was new. Nidhi nearly asked Jaya Aunty about the professor, but then she recalled what Ambika had said. *He was a friend of her son.* The dead son, Shankar, about whom not a word had been breathed since Nidhi arrived.

She did not ask.

A week and a half passed. Padmini went out for vegetables, and, when she came back, she presented Nidhi with a roll of cheap, colorful bangles from the market. Nidhi, who hadn't worn such bangles in years and considered them babyish, was unaccountably moved. Her father called to say that there was still no improvement in her mother. Ambika sighed and swept. Jaya Aunty watched five minutes of "The Terminator" before switching to a game show set in a crystal maze.

•

Then one morning, Nidhi woke up to find a man at the dining table. He was around fifty, she guessed, with a balding head, a long body, and slim, tapering fingers. He wore yellow pajama bottoms with white stripes, and a white V-necked undershirt. "Hello," he said. "Sorry if I disturbed you last night. Those flights always come in so bloody late. I'm Sudhir."

His accent stood just to the side of any that Nidhi recognized. "You didn't disturb me," she said, cautiously taking a seat. It was true. She'd managed, despite the heat, to sleep through his arrival.

Padmini brought in idlis, steaming in their many-tiered tower, and a steel bowl of coconut chutney. The professor—it had to be him—leaned forward and sniffed appreciatively.

Then Jaya Aunty sailed in, in a bright-orange silk sari. "Eat, eat!" she called. "Smelling it won't fill your stomach!" She giggled at her own joke.

Nidhi stared. What was this giggling? And this tone, so purring and coquettish? The professor seemed to be thinking the same thing, for he swivelled his head and looked at Nidhi directly. In his look, Nidhi detected a sad acknowledgment of the ridiculousness of Jaya Aunty's little performance, but, more than that, she saw—or believed she saw—an entreaty. He was asking Nidhi to go along with it.

"Already pestering me?" the professor asked, turning gravely back to Nidhi's great-aunt. "You're regressing, my dear Jaya. Last time, you had the decency to wait until *after* breakfast."

"Such a joker." Jaya Aunty giggled again. "You haven't changed at all."

•

The professor, Nidhi learned, was not a professor but a businessman. His name was Sudhir Desai, and he was Kenyan. That is, someone in his family had gone to Kenya from Gujarat a hundred years ago and had settled on the coast there. Sudhir Desai had been born in a town called Mombasa, so he was not Indian in the way that Nidhi was. He explained this to her in so many words, with a kind look that said she probably wouldn't understand.

"Sort of like Gandhi," Nidhi said. "The Indians in South Africa."

He was about to eat his last piece of idli but stopped and looked at her.

"Not bad," he said. "Sort of. Yes."

"Are you here on business, Sudhir?" Nidhi asked. She'd already tried calling him Uncle, and he'd told her that he preferred Sudhir, which was how she knew that he was even older than she'd guessed.

"Business?" He laughed. "No. I'm here, well, for a hobby, you could say."

Padmini came into the dining room

LAMENT

We were never a family of food snobs.
We barely knew what a food snob was.
Good food was food you liked; taste meant partiality.

The stars had blessed the neighborhood
with a Po' Folks, which later transformed
into Folks, then closed, but in my psyche

it's still there, complete with the Po'
because I left so long ago
that I confuse the dead with the far away.

Thus, to me, my grandparents breathe.
They relish fried chicken, sweet tea,
and biscuits at a down-home place

where I'm a kid, my parents middle-aged.
I haven't gone north nor betrayed
those beginnings. Haven't turned gourmet

or true amateur,
and no one's afraid to invite me to dinner
because I cook like an expert or order that way.

Where do I lodge my innocent plea?
Whatever I've learned, I'm still me
and want to share a table

with the people I'll miss or who'll miss me
when whoever's going first goes down that street.
Together we'll devour whatever we're able

to ladle out. Since the stars command
that no matter our plans,
an R.S.V.P. is always a maybe,

the reasons to gather
have never been clearer.
The dinner is gravy.

—*Adrienne Su*

and took the idli tower away. Sudhir Desai smiled at her, but she ignored him. She seemed withdrawn and sullen, the way she'd been during Nidhi's first days. Sudhir Desai turned to Nidhi with a sigh, as if to say, *I'm trying*.

Nidhi asked, "What kind of hobby?"

•

His room was not unlike hers: a bed, a chair. But, being on the terrace, it was not at all cavelike. It boasted two decent-sized windows, not on the terrace side but on the exterior wall, one of which was fitted with a small A.C. unit. The A.C. was rattling away, and Nidhi's skin smarted in the artificial cold.

The other difference was that his room was jammed with books. Plywood shelves lined the walls, their planks bowed in the middle. The books weren't in great condition, either. Many of the spines had peeled off, and Nidhi could see the string and glue that held the pages together. Still, they were books. Sudhir Desai laughed at the look on her face.

"Don't get too excited. They're not novels." He touched his temples in mock divination. "Something tells me you're the type of girl who's crazy for novels."

She was. But hearing him say it made her wish she wasn't.

"You should have seen them when I first came," he said, gently brushing a tatty volume. "Jaya had them downstairs. Bang in the middle of the living room. Nobody had looked at them for years. They were falling apart. Pages on the floor, silverfish, mold, you name it. I brought the shelves up here, installed the A.C. It's not much—a dehumidifier would be better—but at least they're not rotting away down there anymore."

So that explained the void in the living room, Nidhi thought. She looked around again.

"Collecting old books," she said. "That's your hobby?"

"Not exactly." He smiled. "The first time I came, it was a condolence visit. Jaya's son, Shankar—you know about him? He died in Mombasa. I met him there a few times, even helped with the arrangements to send his body home. A few years later, I was in India on some business, and I thought, Why not pay my respects to the grieving mother? You know how it goes."

Nidhi nodded as though she did.

"I started looking through the books and found an impressive little collection about Theosophy. I'd never even heard of it before. And, long story short, I became hooked. Are you familiar with Theosophy, Nidhi? Helena Blavatsky? Annie Besant?"

"Annie Besant," Nidhi echoed, pretending to think. "She's Home Rule, right?"

"Nidhi," he said slowly. "I am impressed."

She had to press her lips together to keep from laughing. Annie Besant was pure luck; Nidhi had studied the Home Rule League in school last year. A tiny motor of pleasure had started to hum away inside her, but she was aware, too, of a flash of scorn. How easy it had been to arouse his admiration!

"Well," Sudhir Desai said, "if you know that, then you must know that the Theosophical Society headquarters are in Adyar, practically next door. Over the years, it's become a tradition of mine. Fly in every few months, stay with Jaya, read, attend some talks. It keeps me sane."

"Can I borrow one?" Nidhi asked. "One of the books?"

"By all means. They're your aunt's, not mine."

"So why do you lock the door?" She had not meant to sound so sharp.

Sudhir Desai looked startled. Then he laughed. "Ah," he said. "You know—force of habit."

•

She chose "Theosophy and the Theosophical Society," by Annie Besant, not because it looked enticing but because she felt herself accidentally bound to Besant now. And though it wasn't a novel, she came to enjoy its old-timey cadences, the *ohs!* and *ahs!* that popped up whenever Besant was overcome by the splendor of her ideas. At times, Nidhi even harbored a kindly superiority toward the book's exhortations, which ranged from the ardently childlike ("Listen to the bird as its whole little being swells in the delight of the sunshine!") to the simply kooky ("And when the Six jewels are bound upon your forehead, then shall you be seen as ready to enter the Portals of Initiation").

She did most of her reading on the plastic-covered sofa, or else up in Sudhir Desai's cool room. Whenever she grew bored, she talked to him about what she had read. He, too, was usually reading but would set his book aside with a wry "All right, let's hear the latest screed." In these dialogues, he liked to adopt the role of believer, patiently defending against her attacks the perfection of the human soul, the joyful oneness of all beings. Nidhi noticed that, as a consequence, she tended to make herself out to be even more cynical and quarrelsome than she really felt. If utopia ever came to exist, she argued, human beings would find a way to destroy it within a month. Nonmaterialism was the sort of wishful nonsense preached by those who weren't in any real danger of going hungry. And what the hell *was* a Portal of Initiation anyway?

She knew that she was modulating herself for Sudhir Desai's benefit—it evidently amused him to hear such harshness from someone so young—and she knew, too, that she wasn't the only one changing in his presence. Jaya Aunty had been watching less TV since his arrival; she found it far more entertaining to watch him. Everything he did made her shriek with laughter. A button came off his shirt one day, and he asked for a needle and thread. "Needle! Thread!" Jaya Aunty cackled. "You bachelors! Manage everything on your own, is it? *Chee!* Padmini will fix it in one minute flat."

It was Padmini, however, who was the most altered. Gone was the garrulous woman Nidhi had known for close to three weeks. There were no more sweet, impractical presents. No surprise groundnuts. Padmini became as disgruntled as Ambika, clomping through her work and barely speaking. Ignoring her better instincts, Nidhi cornered Padmini and tried to probe for a reason.

They were standing in the kitchen, and Padmini spun to face Nidhi. Her expression was distorted with anger. She picked up a tomato from the cutting board, held it under Nidhi's nose, and squeezed. Juice and seeds spurted from between her fingers. Before she could pick up another one, Nidhi backed out of the room.

•

A clue to Padmini's behavior surfaced. It was after lunch on a Friday, Jaya Aunty was flipping channels, Nidhi was reading Besant, and Padmini came in from the garden, where she'd been hanging clothes. Bits of grass stuck to her heels, and a clothespin dangled from the hem of her blouse. Sudhir Desai was at the Theosophical Society for a talk. It was the second such talk he'd attended, and Nidhi had been vaguely disappointed not to have been invited.

The TV landed on the movie "Titanic." It was the sex scene, Nidhi noted with dismay, the one in which Jack and Rose steam up the car window. (Nidhi had watched "Titanic" in the theatre with her parents a couple of years before and had glanced at them during this scene. They were both grinning.) Padmini turned her head to look at the TV. Her glance lasted only a few seconds, and she did not visibly react, but this was enough for Nidhi to grope her way to a dim theory.

Sudhir Desai must remind Padmini of her dead husband, whose friend, after all, he had once been. He must remind her of the life she'd so briefly had—as an adult, a married woman—a life that had been cruelly snatched away and replaced with this endless twilit childhood with Jaya Aunty.

Whether Padmini and her husband had ever done any of the things that Jack and Rose did in that car, Nidhi was not brave enough to imagine. But she did believe that this was why Padmini scowled whenever Sudhir Desai was in the house, lounging in his striped pajamas. He was a hated medium; his presence conjured up the ghost of a different man.

•

It was a hot night—every night was hot, but this one felt infected by heat—and Nidhi was tossing in bed. Her lower back had ached during dinner, and, sure enough, there was the tarnished rust of her period in her underwear. She'd been tired all evening and had fallen asleep early, but she was awakened by cramps in the night. She crept to the bathroom and put on a fresh pad. Wrapping the used one in a page torn from an old *Rani* she'd filched for the purpose, she chucked it into the bin. On her way back to her room, she hesitated, desperate for some air on her face.

She decided to go up to the terrace.

The cement was so hot that it was almost painful to stand on. A bougainvillea growing in the corner threw spiky, quivering shadows. The air felt as thick as smoke. There was not a jot of relief to be found. She turned to go back inside, then paused before Sudhir Desai's closed door. She pictured him asleep, one long leg dangling off the side of the bed. Did bachelors sleep barechested? Maybe even naked? Nidhi laughed to herself, a soft laugh that contained a question, a giddy, half-serious dare. *Would she? Just a peek?* Easy to pass it off as a joke if he woke up. She placed a palm on the door and pushed.

It was locked from the inside.

Her first reaction was relief. Her second, utter horror. Had he somehow been *expecting* her to do this? Had he taken precautions? *Something tells me you're the type of girl* . . . Then she remembered what he'd said about locking the door—force of habit—and she relaxed, even managing another laugh, this one at her own panic. Nevertheless, as she walked down the stairs toward her stuffy bedroom, her legs trembled slightly, as if she'd made a narrow escape.

•

She bled more than usual that month and had to change pads every few hours. Only once did she allow herself to imagine her mother's ordeal—nurses running, shouts, the gory extraction—before putting it out of her mind. Her wrapped pads multiplied in the bin. She stared at them uneasily. When would the bin be emptied? If only she knew where to take the pads, she'd get rid of them herself.

She was reading in the living room one afternoon when Padmini appeared. Jaya Aunty had fallen asleep in front of the TV. Nidhi didn't know where Sudhir Desai was.

"Padmini." Nidhi smiled, glad for a distraction. Then, stiffening: "What are you doing?"

For Padmini held in her arms every one of Nidhi's discarded pads. There had to be a dozen of them. One or two, where she had been careless and not used enough paper, were coming undone, their crimped edges unfurling to expose the dark smears inside.

"Padmini!" Nidhi yelped. "Don't touch those!" She glanced around to see if Jaya Aunty had woken, but her great-aunt was an extraordinarily heavy sleeper and did not move.

"They're dirty. He shouldn't see them," Padmini said calmly. "He" meant Sudhir Desai.

Arms full of Nidhi's blood, Padmini stepped out into the garden. Nidhi, still pleading with her to drop them, followed, the long grass stinging her ankles. They went past the clothesline, past matted vines and drooping red monkey-tail cactuses, to an enormous, wild lantana bush at the far end. Padmini walked around it, disappearing from view. Nidhi followed.

Padmini had made a fire pit, ringed by dark rocks. There were flakes of gray ash on the rocks, and the choking stink of wet soot. She dropped Nidhi's pads into the center and stepped back. Nidhi went closer and peered into the pit. It was apparent that Padmini burned the household trash here, but nothing was fully incinerated; the air was too humid for that. Nidhi saw several charred pages of *Rani*, a few singed potato peels, some scraps of yellow-and-white cloth that looked familiar.

Nidhi squinted, trying to identify the cloth. When she did, she looked up sharply at Padmini, who was holding a match to one of the wrapped pads, which flared limply but didn't catch fire. Unfazed, Padmini lit another match. After ten minutes, she'd used up an entire box of matches and succeeded in reducing Nidhi's pads to a nest of shrivelled black eggs. The air stank of burnt plastic.

•

For the rest of the day, Nidhi debated whether to inform Sudhir Desai of the fate of his pajamas. In the end, she didn't. She couldn't say why. Perhaps he hadn't noticed that they'd gone missing. He hadn't said anything, after all. Plus, she feared that if she broached the subject, he'd want to see the fire pit for himself, and then the whole embarrassing story would come tumbling out: her pads in Padmini's hands, Jack and Rose in the steamy car, her silly theories about Padmini and ghosts and love.

•

Finally, Sudhir Desai invited Nidhi to a Theosophical Society talk. Jaya Aunty, clearly displeased but unable to criticize him, said, "Psh. What will a child do listening to that?"

He tapped her on the head. "You don't need it with that big brain, my dear Jaya, but we ordinary people like to expand our minds." She subsided into contented giggles, and no further objection was raised to Nidhi accompanying him.

The Society was a sprawling campus on the Adyar River, its peaceful walking paths dotted with old buildings and gently unkempt trees. The main building was painted a tranquil yellow, except where eight white plaster elephant heads stared out from a red-accented wall. The lecture, on the subject of clairvoyance, was given by a tall man with gold-rimmed spectacles, and it began with a poem. Nidhi tried to memorize this but retained only the first line, which she recited to herself as the man spoke. *Oh, hidden life, vibrant in every atom. Oh, hidden life, vibrant in every atom. Oh, hidden life . . .*

Afterward, Sudhir Desai walked her around the campus, pointing out its highlights: the shrines built to every religion on earth, the ancient banyan tree, the accommodations for scholars and volunteers. It was dusk when they started back to the house. Nidhi was quiet. Her bleeding had tapered off, but she felt exhausted. Sudhir Desai, too, seemed subdued. He kept tapping a fountain pen in his breast pocket. *Tap, tap, tap.*

He said, "I want to tell you something."

Then, without looking at Nidhi, he began a story. It was about a beautiful German nurse whom he'd met during the war. He did not specify which war, and Nidhi did not ask. He and the nurse had had a passionate affair, and she'd become pregnant. She begged Sudhir Desai to return with her and the baby to Germany, but he couldn't. Not because he didn't want to but because he and another man were already making plans to fly a plane into the jungle.

Nidhi listened in silence, not knowing what to make of this extraordinary confession, which became more garbled as it went on. There was mention of a genocide, armed guerrillas, a cache of gemstones, someone named Sparky. And, by the time all that was over (the genocide? the flying?), it had been too late. He could not bring himself to contact the German nurse or the child, who was his child. Why? Because too much time had passed. And also—why lie?—because he was afraid.

They had reached Jaya Aunty's gate. Nidhi could see lights in the windows.

Sudhir Desai said softly, "I've never told anyone this before. I don't know why I told you. It's just . . . I sense this incredible wisdom in you, Nidhi. You're an old soul. I just knew that, if anyone could understand me, it would be you."

Nidhi didn't respond. She was seeing herself—so thrilled by her own audaciousness, her daring—standing like a fool, like a *child*, in the dark before his closed door. She suddenly wanted to weep.

"Nidhi?" he whispered.

"Is that when you met Shankar?" she asked loudly. "While all of this was happening?"

"Shankar?" He frowned in confusion. "Oh, *that* Shankar. No, that was much later, in Mombasa. Some people introduced us. He wanted to start a

"Hey, no kicking!"

business, and they thought I could help him, I guess. But I saw right away that nothing would come of it."

"Why not?"

"It was a half-baked idea." Sudhir Desai shrugged. "He wasn't the smartest fellow."

"I heard he was a genius."

He gave a short, grateful laugh, as if Nidhi were being droll on purpose to cheer him up. "Shankar? A genius? Sure. Why not? Let's call him a genius. A full-fletched genius."

Later on, she would tell herself that it was a natural thing to say. It had become her role, after all, the one she played with him, the one he himself had encouraged. Nidhi, reader of novels. Argumentative, opinionated, precocious, *wise* Nidhi. How else could she have responded?

"Full-fledged," she said.

"What?" There was an uptick in his voice. Of vigilance. Perhaps of alarm.

"Full-*fledged*," she repeated. "Not 'full-fletched.' "

He laughed again. "Nice try, but you're wrong. It refers to an arrow. The feathers at the bottom are called fletching."

"I know what fletching is," she said quietly. "And that's not where the word comes from."

He looked at her but did not speak. They went into the house. After dinner, Sudhir Desai said good night and retired upstairs. Jaya Aunty and Padmini went to bed soon afterward. Nidhi brushed her teeth and was sitting at the edge of her bed, cooling off in front of her fan, when there was a knock at her door.

"I was wondering," he said pleasantly, "if you'd like to sleep in my room."

He had been called away by an emergency, he explained. He was going straight to the airport, where he would camp out until the early plane to Bombay departed. From there, he'd fly to Nairobi, and on to Mombasa. He said that he'd felt guilty sleeping in his air-conditioned quarters while she sweltered down here. He said that there was no reason she shouldn't take his room, starting tonight. Starting now, in fact. Look, he was all packed and ready to go.

So he was. His suitcase stood by the door in a pool of moonlight.

"What about Jaya Aunty?" Nidhi whispered. "She won't know what happened to you."

"Oh, Jaya's used to me by now. She knows I'll be back."

•

The sheets weren't clean. They smelled of him—of sweat and a soap that Nidhi wasn't familiar with—but she was too tired to care. The A.C. was noisy but effective, and she had to go downstairs and fetch the sheet from her own room to add to his. The bookshelves loomed; the cold constricted her; light leaked into the room from the street lamps below. For a moment, she thought that she would never be able to fall asleep, but she was wrong.

When the door opened, she didn't wake up fully. Everything reached her from far away; her sensations were ghostly. If she did have a thought, it was: *He's here*. Strangely, this did not provoke panic. While she was in this half-asleep state, nothing felt dangerous, and nothing menaced her. She possessed a calm, inexplicable authority over her surroundings. She was the dreamer, the puppet master, and so all of this—the dip of the mattress; the tiny sigh; the soft human bulk pressing down on her; the back-and-forth rocking, erratic and timid at first, then gaining in momentum; the long strands of hair tickling her bare arm—all of it was happening because she, in some distant part of her mind, had willed it so.

She could not say exactly when she understood. But, even then, she did not move. She did not fling Padmini off. She did not scream. The reason was that she had caught sight of Padmini's expression.

Padmini's eyes were closed. She wore a funny look of urgency, of impatient longing, as if she were waiting for something to happen, something that had been promised to her long ago. Surely, Nidhi thought, any minute, Padmini would recognize her, but she only let out a small, frustrated cry and, burying her head in Nidhi's shoulder, increased her efforts, dashing her hips hard against Nidhi's through the two sheets—passionate, determined, and utterly ineffectual. How long it lasted, Nidhi couldn't say, but all at once Padmini was rolling off. She was standing up, her back to Nidhi. Her hair hung loose past her shoulders, silvery and very beautiful.

Then she was gone. Nidhi stayed motionless for several minutes. Finally, she got out of bed, crossed the room, closed the door, and, with shaking fingers, latched it.

•

She did not believe now, of course, that he'd had any kind of emergency. Why had she been stupid enough to think so? She imagined him strolling with his suitcase to the Theosophical Society and requesting a bed for the night, or else walking the dark streets of Adyar, past snoring watchmen and vigilant street dogs, feeling serene and self-congratulatory, even fatherly, at having provided her with useful instruction, the lesson he thought she so badly needed to learn: *You think you're smart. You think you know the world. But, little girl, you don't know a damn thing.*

•

Eight days later, she was back in Bangalore. Her father, guilt-ridden, spoiled her for weeks. Her mother was withdrawn at first, a little sheepish, tentative. But jokes slowly reappeared, as did words like "fetus," "cervical insufficiency," "evacuation." Still, things were not the same; there had been a definite blocking off, a shift of terrain that put Nidhi on one side, her parents on the other.

Nidhi found that she did not mind this.

She did not mind because of something that had occurred to her during the train ride home. She had closed her eyes, and the rhythmic rocking of the carriage had brought back the rocking of Padmini, her anguished little cry at the end. And then it was not Nidhi's body under those sheets but her father's. Her own father at fifteen years old, lanky and inexperienced, panicking at this turn of events, trying to decide what to do, how to respond.

Naturally, Nidhi did not actually think that what had happened to her had also happened to him—if it had, he would never have sent her there—but, for those few seconds on the train, she gave in and allowed herself to imagine it. Would he have held still, as she had, and waited for it to be over? Would he have fought and screamed?

Or would he have done something else entirely? ♦

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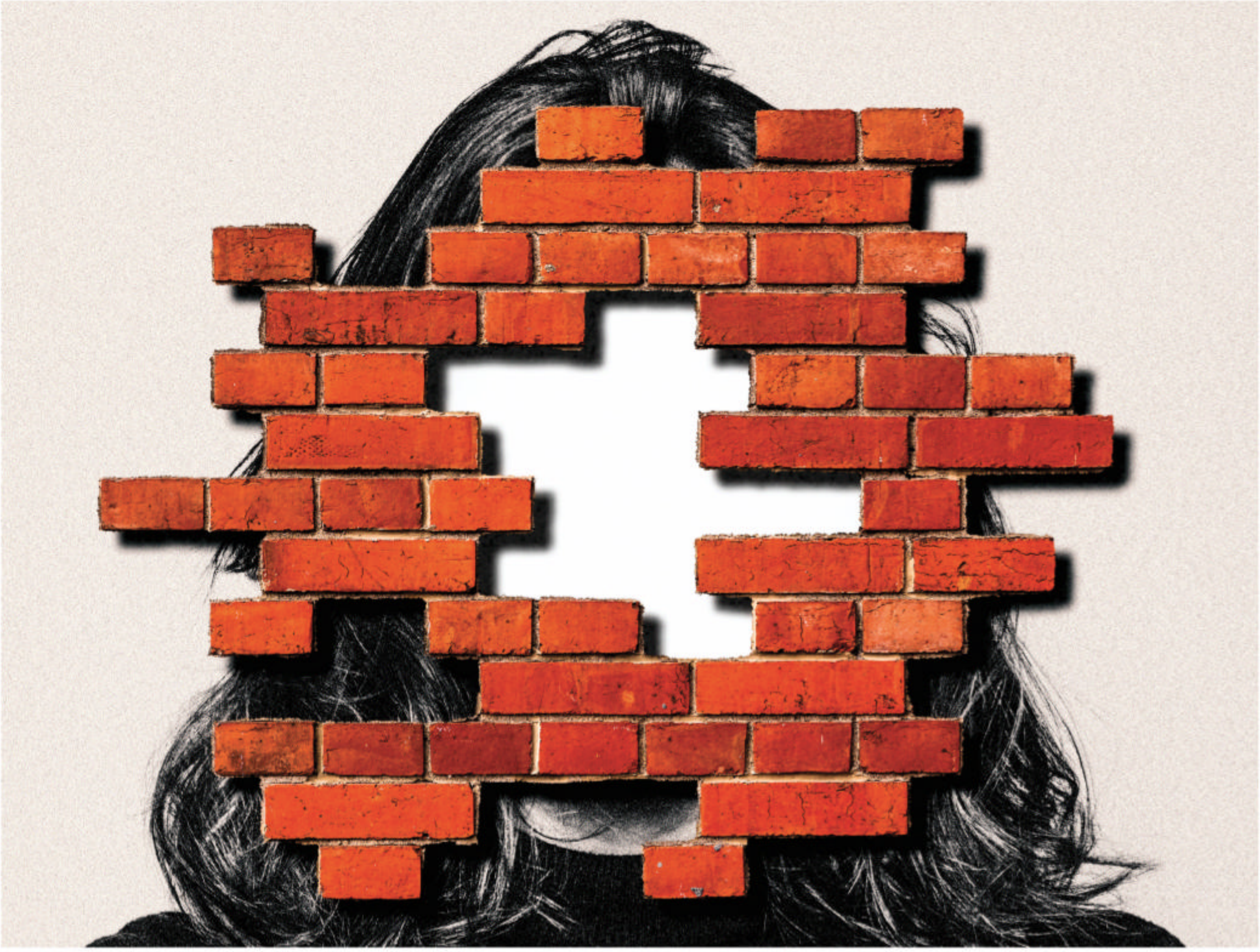

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BOOKS

VANISHING ACT

Rachel Cusk's protest against personhood.

BY BECCA ROTHFELD

The protagonist of Rachel Cusk's new novel, "Life of M," has a peculiar technique for falling asleep. She "visualizes a brick wall. It fills her field of vision; its perimeters are out of sight. With a narrow implement she begins chipping at the mortar around a first brick, usually the one directly in front of her. She works steadily and calmly. The mortar loosens and falls away piece by piece. When it has been removed she pushes the brick forward with her hand. It falls down the other side of the wall, and now in its place there's a small rectangle of blank white light. With her implement she begins chipping at the brick beside or above it, and then at the one beside or above that. The white shape made of light gets bigger and bigger. When it is big enough, she crawls through it."

It is as good an image as any for Cusk's own trajectory. The reigning queen of autofiction, the literary subgenre in which the lines that divide narrator from author are knowingly smudged, she is renowned for her cool, glassy prose and her stark austerity of vision. Her reputation rests on three works that she published to great fanfare in the twenty-tens—"Outline" (2014), "Transit" (2016), and "Kudos" (2018). Their reticent narrator, Faye, resembles her creator insofar as she is a divorced British writer with two children,

Freedom is something that Cusk's characters—particularly her female characters—long for and lack.

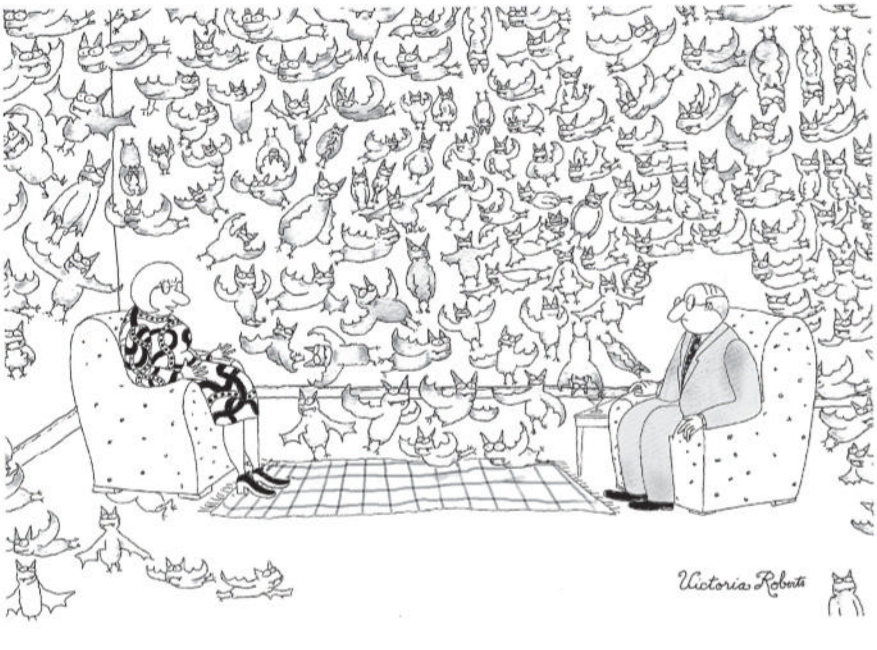
PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY JACK SMYTH

but we learn almost nothing else about her, and she rarely speaks on her own behalf. Instead, she operates like a recording device as she listens to a series of long-winded interlocutors at literary festivals and dinner parties.

Cusk, by her own account, began to tire of traditional novels in 2012, when she endured a bout of what she described, in an interview with the *Guardian*, as "creative death" following the publication and hostile reception of her controversial memoir "Aftermath," which details her acrimonious separation from her husband. For several years, she could neither read nor write fiction, which had come to seem "fake and embarrassing" to her. But a careful examination of Cusk's work reveals that she had been preparing to jettison the rudiments of the form well before then. She had scarcely started writing novels when she began taking them apart, brick by brick, in search of the white vacancy glaring beyond them.

Cusk's first three books, two of which were published before she was thirty, are outfitted with all the traditional amenities: scenes, characters, plots, and, for good measure, self-conscious allusions to Jane Austen and the Brontës. These early efforts are funny, cynical, and so overwritten that it is hard to believe they were produced by the same woman later hailed for her spare, sleek style. By Cusk's fourth novel, however, she was staging an understated revolt against the form she had chosen and had evidently already started to disdain. "The Lucky Ones" (2003), "In the Fold" (2005), "Arlington Park" (2006), and "The Bradshaw Variations" (2009)—the products of her middle and best period—are more like interlinked character sketches than like plotted novels. Each presents a group portrait of a handful of disaffected British suburbanites—husbands who resent their deadening jobs, toddlers who whine and interrupt, and, above all, hassled wives subsumed by a crush of household obligations.

These bleak, formidable novels of domestic desolation are crisply written but slightly old-fashioned, not only because they contain characters and dialogue (devices that Cusk would later dispense with) but because they are about upper-middle-class families living in spacious homes, typically on a single income. (A Cusk novel is always set in a piece of aspirational real estate, often one inhabited by that increasingly obsolete creature, the affluent housewife.) Still, for all their quaintness, the books of her middle period are icily virtuosic. In the prim suburbs that are Cusk's specialty, women are swallowed alive by parts they have no choice but to play. Motherhood, perhaps even more than marriage, serves to restrict and entrap them. In Cusk's smartingly honest 2001 memoir, "A Life's Work," she likens having children to enduring a period of incarceration upward of seven times. "Motherhood, for me, was a sort of compound fenced off from the rest of the world," she writes. It was a "cell," a "trap," in which she was an "inmate."



"We admit we have bats. Now what?"

As chronicles of social imprisonment, Cusk's middle novels are impressive, but as stylistic feats they are more dazzling still. In them, her prose tightens into something gleaming and aerodynamic. Its imagery is merciless and meticulous: sun falls through windows in "great slanting slabs," and a pair of pajamas sprawls across a bed like "the discarded skin of a snake." The affect of these books—brisk, unsentimental, exacting—serves their diagnosis. They are clinical portrayals of a familiar feminine malady, the life too tidily compacted to be free.

And if there is one word that Cusk repeats throughout her corpus, it is "freedom." Freedom is something that her characters—particularly her female characters—long for and lack. What do these wives and mothers, with their ample back yards and their afternoon coffee groups, hope to be free of? For Cusk, freedom involves wriggling out of the social and historical integuments that enclose a person into a bounded self. "I don't think character exists anymore," she told Alexandra Schwartz in 2018, in an interview published in this magazine—but the women in her best novels certainly struggle to cast it off. For them, character not only exists but functions as a compound, a cell, a trap. To achieve freedom, then, is to escape character, and with it the whole edifice of novelistic contrivance. Cusk seems to see the conventions of womanhood and the conventions of fiction, in its most traditional and mannered incarnations, as isomorphic: she consistently discusses motherhood and marriage in explicitly narrative terms. In "A Life's Work," she reflects, "My loves have observed the conventions first of the familial narrative, then of the romantic. I have never sought to rewrite these conventions. I have accorded with their cadences, their plot."

Beginning with the "Outline" trilogy, however, Cusk sought to rewrite them by way of rejecting plot altogether. Everywhere Faye goes—to an elegant wine bar, to a relative's sprawling country house, to an island off the Greek coast—people talk at her, and the trilogy consists of prolix monologues occasionally punctuated by a "he said" or a "she said." A man sitting next to Faye on a plane tells her about having to put his dog to sleep; a playwright recounts her divorce and a later assault; everyone speaks vaguely and grandiosely about love and death. Silverware clanks. The tide laps softly against the shore as the sun sets. One character remarks, "Fate . . . is only truth in its natural state." Another muses, "I hadn't realized . . . how much of navigation is the belief in progress, and the assumption of fixity in what you have left behind."

These surprisingly cheesy lines are not always devoid of irony. Some are delivered by characters Faye evidently believes to be pompous and pretentious, but some are delivered by Faye herself—and, at any rate, Faye's voice is indistinguishable from those of the people she meets. Whether she sits down next to a stranger on a plane or strikes up a conversation with a worker renovating her apartment, the ensuing pseudo-philosophizing is the same.

The trilogy is the logical culmination of Cusk's project up to that point. With its calculated omissions, she removes another brick from the façade and comes that much closer to the white glow waiting beneath. In interviews, she has explained that she was trying to capture a world in which individuality has been supplanted by a set of stock cultural experiences. The soliloquies to which Faye is subjected are meant as a reflection of the general point of view, the kind of shared perspective expressed by the chorus in a Greek play. As Faye puts it in "Outline," she is in search of the "sort of objectivity that arose when the focus became the sum of human parts and the individual was blotted out." Character is obsolete because we have all collapsed into one (comfortable, healthy, well-travelled) person who talks in high tones about heartbreak and aesthetics at literary festivals and expensive restaurants overlooking the sea.

So what is left after the demolitions of the trilogy? What remains to undo? In "Kudos," Cusk stopped naming places. The city where most of the book takes place is just "the city"—any city, every city, the proper setting for a narrator who is any and every person. In her post-trilogy period, she stopped naming people, too, truncating them into letters. In "Second Place" (2021), a woman called M invites an artist called L to paint on her property. "Parade" (2024) goes even further: it is about a series of artists (some of them clearly modelled on real-life analogues) all called G.

The mush that is G is Cusk's best attempt to imagine what comes after selfhood. But she cannot quite picture it; formlessness is hard, by its very nature, to formalize, and "Parade" (which really is a parade, a procession of characters who bleed into one amorphous non-character) is full of toothless abstraction. Anemic observations such as "Pure perception . . . involves no interaction, no subjectivity," are all that's available once separate selves have liquefied into gelatinous generality. "Parade" is almost mystical in its erasure of delineation, and, like all mystical texts, it is always on the verge of quavering into meaninglessness. One of the gaggle of Gs creates installations in which a piece of cloth is "suspended from the ceiling," embodying "human form without identity, without face or features. It was genderless, this floating being." A similarly floating being—so devoid of friction, so bereft of drama, so predictably boring—is the narrator of "Life of M," Cusk's weakest novel yet.

"Life of M" is an unwieldy book with three disparate threads, each focussed on a different character (or a different protest against character). Several sections are narrated by I, about whom we learn almost nothing; I could be male or female, young or old. All we know is that he or she has a partner (also a nameless and genderless nonentity) who winds up in the hospital with an unspecified disease, and that he or she lives in a city (though it, too, remains aggravatingly schematic). Perhaps most important, I is a writer who befriends an actress called M. One initial confronts another.

Third-person sections about M—sections that we understand to be I's perhaps inaccurate imaginings—make up the meat of the book (part of which began as a story in this magazine). "A little while ago, I told the actor M I was thinking of writing her autobiography," the novel begins. What follows is presumably the narrator's effort to make good on his or her threat. But there can be no autobiography without the "auto," and no biography of someone who lacks a first-person perspective. In lieu of a stable identity, M has only a string of parts that she plays consummately. She sees herself as her audience might see her, imitating the cohesive person she cannot quite become. "She has acted the parts of depressed people, but she has no evidence that depression is real," the narrator writes. "Humans struggling with their feelings . . . forms a large part of her acting repertoire," but authentic emotion remains alien to M. Her chief characteristic when she is offscreen—insofar as any celebrity is ever truly offscreen—is her affability. But even the hallmark of this approachability, "the indefatigable mechanism" of her smile, has something artificial about it.

Perhaps because M has no inner life, she is defined largely by the lavish settings in which we find her. The phrase "it is," followed by a brief description of M's locale, recurs at the start of the fragments that make up M's sections: "It is the interior of a limousine"; "It is a spa on the top floor of a tall building"; "It is a restaurant, hidden away down a passage." Because so many of the places that M frequents are luxurious, her sections have the sheen of a life-style magazine. It is hard to credit the novel's dutiful condemnation of the actor's vapidity, given that the only passages with any sensory texture are those describing opulent hotel rooms, beach houses, and rooftop spas. In almost loving detail, Cusk lingers over the furniture on the terrace of a vacation house that M is renting—an "elegant round marble table with four powdered steel chairs," a "long and wide teak daybed with taupe-colored cushions." How much more tactile are these sentences than any of Cusk's writing about M, much less about I!

But what distinguishes M from the rest of us in the narrator's eyes is not that she seems disembodied, or that she is almost always playing a role. Cusk repeatedly suggests, with unsubtle vehemence, that actors are not as different from private citizens as they may seem—that, in fact, we are all beholden to the parts we perform. M is unlike an ordinary person only insofar as she flits with unusual frequency from one role to the next, forgoing the definition that more enduring performances afford. Even the vestiges of a personality elude her.

The question that has been most persistently posed by the press—whether M is based on Cusk's real-life acquaintance Natalie Portman, who is reportedly offended by the implication—has an answer as obvious as the very line of inquiry is tedious. M's filmography bears a marked resemblance to Portman's: she began her acting career as a child, as Portman did, and she appeared in a movie that is readily identifiable as "Black Swan," Portman's greatest success. But, in the book's final, metatextual scene, M tells the narrator, "I don't like the way you portray me," and the narrator protests that he or she has written not a biography but a novel: "But it isn't you. . . . It isn't anyone." Cusk's crime is not that she has used a real person as inspiration for a character, as writers have done since time immemorial, but that the protagonist of her novel "isn't anyone," that she is little more than a device for thematizing the dissolution of the self.

The third thread that makes up "Life of M" is narrated by We, and it presents an even more dogged refusal of specificity. We is "not young" and "not old," and, like I, they are neither male nor female. They, too, live in "the city." Readers familiar with the outline of Cusk's biography—she lives in Paris with her current husband, the painter Siemon Scamell-Katz—can divine hints of her life in the scant details that We reveals. "The city" is teeming with tourists, and it boasts an Eiffel-like tower. But, without the benefit of this auxiliary information, We would remain so hazy as to be almost illegible, like a shape becoming indistinct in the mist. They lead something that has the silhouette, but none of the weight or the substance, of a life. "We are in the midst of our lives and talk about what we see there, what we feel, the events that have occurred and what they might mean," they report. What do they see there? How do they feel? What events have occurred? Can anything more than the most desultory gesture at a novel emerge while these questions go unanswered?

In the end, the I, M, and We sections are never satisfactorily integrated. Cusk's final affront to the novel is to disaggregate it into unreconciled elements without making any concession to cohesion. Despite her reputation for rigor, "Life of M" is not a disciplined dismantling; it is discombobulated and haphazard, a machine breaking down at random. As Cusk has become more disdainful of fiction and more insistent on the documentary function of art, her work has become vaguer and less concrete, fading like old ink into blurred indeterminacy. Her ambition for the style of her latest book is stated clearly enough in its narrator's admiring description of a memoir about sexual abuse. The tone of this memoir "was neither personal nor impersonal, it possessed a deep and unmistakable authority, the authority of an object." But *should* a book be written with the authority of an object? The authority of objects derives from their imperviousness—but too total an imperviousness precludes writing and action altogether.

In light of her dream of disintegrating the particularities of selfhood into the warm liquid of universality, it is no surprise that Cusk has invented a new sort of novel that is nearly unidentifiable as such. After all, the novel as we know it concerns itself with people bound by the dictates of the social world, not people approximating the point of view of things. In interviews, Cusk has contrasted "seeing the world" in a way that relates to "society" with seeing it in a way that relates to "art," as if the highest instances of the novelistic art—Edith Wharton's "The Age of Innocence," Henry James's "The Ambassadors," Virginia Woolf's "Mrs. Dalloway"—weren't suffused with social observation. We is so antisocial as to be decidedly antinovelistic: what results is less like fiction, with its vibrant evocations, than like undergraduate art theory. "Many of the popular painting exhibitions feature abstract art," We observes. "It is difficult to know what these paintings mean. Their distance from reality seems assured, yet what in that case are they showing? People stand in front of these paintings as though waiting for them to explain themselves. Sometimes, standing in front of paintings such as these, it has seemed possible that we too could become abstract."

At times, "Life of M" threatens to become a book composed entirely of vacuities like these, especially when squishy imprecisions infiltrate M's sections, too: a beautiful seaside view "seems to still the heart and unfold it into the substance of time itself." (That ugly near-repetition of "it" and "itself" to refer to two different nouns in the span of a single clause!) In the end, deprived of the possibility of self-revelation or action, We is reduced to baldly stating their intentions: "We are struck by this element, character, which is at once so defining and so limiting. . . . We do not operate any longer through character." It is hard to imagine that, after a renunciation of everything that might lend texture or fascination to a book, there is anything left to say, but the novel rattles on for nearly forty more pages.

There is another word that Cusk uses almost as often as "freedom": "fate." Her characters yearn for freedom so acutely because they are mired in the morass of fate, which, in a Cusk novel, takes the form of the bourgeois family and—as the critic Andrea Long Chu has astutely argued—of a femininity understood in regressive biological terms. "I could hardly be said to have any choice in the matter," Cusk writes of motherhood in "A Life's Work." In 2019, she declared in an essay in the *Times Magazine* that "motherhood is an inextricable aspect of female being."

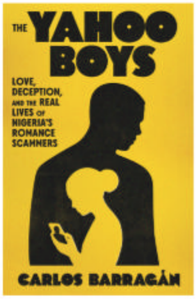
Although Cusk has claimed in recent interviews that she no longer "feels gendered"—she has aged out of motherhood now that her children have grown up—her recent fiction demonstrates that she has trouble envisaging life after gender in any concrete detail. The inescapability of the female condition is so central to Cusk's world view that she can sooner imagine the end of personhood than the end of a way of being organized around heterosexual marriage and childbearing. The narrator of "Life of M" has at last succeeded in breaking free of the binary—in the final scene, M asks, "Are you a guy or a girl?"—but only at the expense of breaking free of anything we could understand as humanity. Unlike many thinkers wedded to a retrograde and restrictive conception of womanhood, Cusk seems to take no joy in what she perceives as the natural order of things. Her traditionalism derives from her fatalism: she is enough of a feminist to lament the lot of suburban mothers ensconced in their houses, but she subscribes too instinctively to the elementality of gender to believe that its terms can truly be altered.

If womanhood is an immutable fact, Cusk seems to conclude, she can at least do compensatory violence to her fiction. She can slash at that artifact of heteronormativity, the form that began with the marriage plot and has always essentially concerned the domestic indignities that most gall her: the novel. What we cannot do in life we are doomed to rehearse in fiction, even if we do so by attacking the very basis of fiction as a human practice.

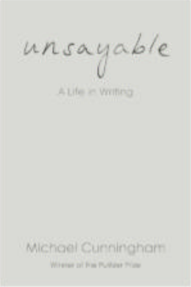
Still, very much despite herself, Cusk has not succeeded in expunging character from her work. It obstinately intrudes, even in the books from which she has most arduously endeavored to exile it. Is she achieving kenosis by amalgamating the cacophony of competing voices that usually enrich a novel? Or is it the height of narcissistic self-magnification to suppose that the universal voice sounds so much like your own—and therefore that the universal voice speaks only from well-appointed rentals on the Mediterranean? In the trilogy, what masquerades as self-abnegation serves in practice to recast the world in the image of a particular kind of person: humorless, cosmopolitan, self-important. In "Life of M," there is even less of a filter between the characters' perspectives and that of the book. M sounds like I sounds like We, and the distance between the airy abstractions that they all repeat and the novel's own commitments collapses entirely. In both cases, there is something at once magisterial and leadenly self-regarding about the melancholic rhythms of Cusk's prose, with its stiff and stately syntax and its utter impatience with the real vagaries of difference.

Yet I would rather dislike Cusk's voice than read a book—would it even be a book?—without a voice at all. Someone who had really divested herself of personhood would simply exist without intervening in the world, the way a rock does. That Cusk goes on writing is evidence that she cannot really envision the negation of self that she claims to desire. In "Parade," she confesses that "a novel was a voice, and a voice had to belong to someone." If she ever succeeds in becoming no one, she will stop writing novels that wish they weren't novels. Instead, there will be only a flash of white light, originating nowhere in particular, beaming out into the uneventful void. ♦

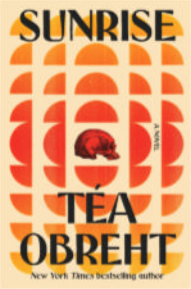
BRIEFLY NOTED


THE
YAHOO
BOYS
LOVE, DECEPTION, AND THE REAL LIVES OF NIGERIA'S ROMANCE SCAMMERS
CARLOS BARRAGÁN

The Yahoo Boys, *by Carlos Barragán (Farrar, Straus & Giroux).* In 2022, the author of this engrossing investigation travelled to Lagos, Nigeria, to find the person who, years earlier, ensnared his mother in an online romance scam. What he discovered was a place primed by its history and its poverty for the emergence of youths, known as Yahoo Boys, dedicated to conning Western marks using false identities, fake naked pictures, and flattery. In Barragán's account, Nigerian public discourse casts the Yahoo life style—fuelled by drugs and extravagant spending—as a double-edged sword, both a stain on the country's reputation and a powerful economic engine. As the book follows four Yahoos, it assembles a story of loneliness in the digital age—a loneliness that deforms scammer and scammed alike.



Unsayable, *by Michael Cunningham (Random House).* When this warm memoir begins, the author, a celebrated novelist, observes that the world is "sufficient unto itself. It neither knows nor cares if anyone writes about it." Why write, then? In the pages that follow, Cunningham remembers his upbringing in middle-class suburban California, his gradual awareness of his gayness, his time as a countercultural student at Stanford, and his stints working as a hustler and a bartender, all the while elaborating writing's many purposes—and offering guidance on how to do it well. It's a way to entertain, to turn "ephemera into objects," to "render and recognize everything and everyone."



Sunrise, *by Téa Obreht (Random House).* This kaleidoscopic novel, which unfolds across three time lines, opens in 2024, with the crash of a Cessna in the mountains of Wyoming. A survivor wanders alone through the wilderness until she finds Sunrise, an abandoned old Western town. It's the very place that, some twenty years earlier, a county local, Coll, is working tirelessly to preserve. But, when Coll meets a writer who's similarly interested in the town's legacy, his plans get derailed. The writer shares her manuscript—embedded within the novel and set in 1902—which contains little-known truths about Sunrise and the man who founded it, someone whom Coll had long revered. As the narratives converge, Obreht teases out the relationship between our conceptions of history and of ourselves.

Skin
Contact
a novel
Elisa
Faison

Skin Contact, *by Eliza Faison (Cardinal).* At the outset of this funny and pensive novel, Frances, a married woman, tells her husband, Ben, that she "sort of" has a crush on a waitress—thereby kicking off their open marriage. She and Ben soon discover the joys of sleeping with other people, both together and separately. For Frances, who is thirty, the experiment is, at first, a way to help her cope with the grief of losing her mother. Then, just as she is realizing that she might want to have a child, Ben falls in love with another woman. Torn between a life that might seem "frivolous" and one that feels "flattening," the couple have to decide what, for them, is the right path.

BOOKS

MAKING THE SEX SCANDAL

A nineteenth-century panic is a parable about our zeal for public shaming.

BY ADAM GOPNIK

The shape of a certain kind of scandal is remarkably similar, epoch to epoch. A charismatic, mysterious figure is accused of conducting secret sexual rituals that are threatening and exploitative. The accusation rumbles, then explodes locally, drawing in authorities and prompting an investigation. In retrospect, the accusation may contain no truth, some truth, or considerable truth. But the integrity of the accusation has little to do with the intensity of the inquisition. People who might otherwise bring some skepticism or sense of proportion to the story are intimidated and soon find it too risky to object. The accusation works its way through society, annihilating reputations, deservedly or not. Afterward, the society picks itself up, recognizes the excesses, and regrets them—though too late for those caught in the tempest.

Sometimes, as with the McMartin Preschool "satanism" case, in the nineteen-eighties, there is nothing underneath the hysteria but more hysteria. Sometimes, as with the Salem witch trials, a real, if harmless, substratum of "magic" underlies the panic. Sometimes the accusations have weight, but the context is more complicated than they imply—as with Richard Baker, the Clintonesque San Francisco Zen master accused, in the nineteen-eighties, of sexually exploiting his adepts. Or, as with Oscar Wilde's prosecution, in the eighteen-nineties, opposing truths can coexist: Wilde was the victim of a brutal inquisition, a great and benevolent comic writer sent to hard labor for desires the state had no business punishing; and his sex partners included working-class teen-agers, sixteen and seventeen, who were too readily exploited by wealthy men like him.

The accusation spreads through society, annihilating reputations, deservedly or not.

There's a similar pattern in the crusades launched in late-nineteenth-century America against "white slavery"—the supposed kidnapping of middle-class white girls by evil foreigners. As scholars note, the women involved were treated, so to speak, as both vixens and victims. The sociologist Brian Donovan, in a book on the subject, describes how the hysteria over white slavery served at once as a progressive campaign against prostitution and as a vindication of nativist fear. The trope proved remarkably resilient. It became the engine of the "Taken" thriller franchise, in which the abduction of wholesome American daughters, immediately after landing at Charles de Gaulle Airport, by Albanian mafiosi is presented as a standing risk of foreign travel.

One of the earliest, oddest, and most instructive of these scandals is now the subject of a fine and detailed book, "A Scandal in Königsberg" (Penguin Press), by Christopher Clark, the Regius Professor of History at Cambridge. The scandal in question erupted in the eighteen-thirties in the Prussian college town of Königsberg—today, after wars and upheavals, the isolated Russian city of Kaliningrad. Immanuel Kant, who had taught and written there, remained the oracle of a previous generation, and his ideas still fertilized argument, creating an atmosphere dense with permissions and prohibitions. Kant's work, as the townspeople understood it, seemed to suggest that only disciplined rationality could guard religion against irrational enthusiasm. The furor that greeted the appearance of irrational enthusiasm plays like Anthony Trollope rewritten by Henrik Ibsen: a college-town dispute, turning first sour and then sinister. The cast includes figures with names out of Mel Brooks, among them Count and Contessa Finck von Finckenstein, yet the stakes were high, and the consequences grave.

The story begins in 1810, when Johann Wilhelm Ebel, a young cleric who had studied at the University of Königs-

ILLUSTRATION BY SOPHY HOLLINGTON

berg, returned to the city as a teacher and preacher. Exceptionally sincere and curious, Ebel had been startled, as a student, by the rationalist theology prevalent among Prussia's educated élite. This was the dawn of the "higher criticism," when German scholars began to read the Bible as a historical text, touched by myth and marked by the conditions of its making. The tendency found its most explosive expression when David Friedrich Strauss's "Life of Jesus" appeared, in 1835. To many believers, the approach invited atheism; Clark compares the outcry over Strauss's book to the Muslim reception of "The Satanic Verses."

Like William F. Buckley, Jr., or any other Catholic kid arriving at Harvard or Yale in the late nineteen-forties to find himself among jeerers and doubters, Ebel searched desperately for authority. He discovered it in the appealingly mushy teachings of Johann Heinrich Schönherr, an eccentric, self-taught theosophist fourteen years his senior. Schönherr's ideas, as best one can understand them, began with a glimpse of water lilies illuminated by the sun. From this, he inferred two primordial forces, one a fiery light and the other cascading water, whose collision explained everything from the creation of mankind to the origin of evil. These forces could be imagined as two beings and, by metaphoric extension, as male and female. (The idea still appears, in a transmuted form, in James Joyce's "Finnegans Wake," where Joyce, who had absorbed theosophical ideas before leaving Dublin, took up the notion of water as woman and mountains or minerals as man.)

More broadly, the effort to reconcile reason and romantic instinct was central to the era: on one side, there was the seeming proof that everything was susceptible to mechanical explanation; on the other, the powerful intuition that life remained mysteriously sublime. In Schönherr's teachings, Ebel saw a means of harmonizing the two. This was an earnest, Germanic kind of resistance to reason by way of more reason. It's a familiar move. People still use science to prove that religion was right all along. The design of the eye, the flagellum of the bacterium, the leap of the quantum, the supposed free will of the electron—in every modern period, some fragrant scientific metaphor is seized upon as evidence of a discoverable divine order. As recently as the nineteen-eighties, John Updike wrote an entire novel, "Roger's Version," about another excitable young cleric, much like Ebel, in the grip of this delusion. (Predictably, he is also in the grip of sex.) Science kills superstition but seems to take the soul with it. It became the task of the educated cleric to put the soul back in.

Theosophy's principal binary, though on the surface abstract, lent itself rather quickly to an erotic interpretation. Soul, left to steep, gets read as sex, and Ebel was nothing if not soulful. He was described as having long, shiny curls parted down the middle "like a lady," among other "feminine" qualities that made him alluring to women worshippers. He embodied the *sensitivo* professor, and soon gathered devoted followers, many female, whom people referred to as Ebelians. They naturally inspired gossip in the small college town. "It was fun to be around Ebel—at least for women like Ida von der Groeben," Clark writes of a wealthy young widow whose melancholy Ebel helped lift, "and she was not the only one of whom it was said that Ebel's preaching and pastoral advice had awakened them from years of melancholy, rendering them capable of taking pleasure in everyday life."

Inevitably, rumors curdled into accusations. After Count Finckenstein, a local aristocrat with busybody tendencies, fell out with his Ebelian sister, he started spreading them. In a letter to an Ebelian cousin, the Count accused the pastor of recommending an illicit sexual encounter as a path to sanctification. Ebel had even "urged me by means of hints on a number of occasions to do this *in his presence*, which I didn't do, praise be to God!" the Count claimed. "This is Satan's work on these poor people, this is the rotten fruit, these are the dangers that threaten all girls who join the Ebel group. And this is why only women or male hermaphrodites are interested in joining it." Women and feminized men, in Finckenstein's telling, were the natural prey and proof of Ebel's corruption.

Then a fellow-clergyman within the Ebel circle, Heinrich Diestel, who had been shown the letter, wrote a wrathful protest against Finckenstein's claims and, as with so many misjudged e-mails of our own day, made things worse. Who could reprimand Ebel, Diestel asked, for promoting a Christianity that aimed to "sanctify every domain of human life *without exception*, to sanctify and ennoble social and domestic relationships, to sanctify and ennoble not just churches but also houses, not just meeting halls but also bedrooms?" This was an ill-timed and ill-considered sentence. Though Diestel went on to make clear that no one was proposing to turn bedrooms into brothels, introducing sexuality into a sacred context was enough to shake the little world of interconnected townspeople. Soon, the quarrel escalated into both a church disciplinary inquiry and a criminal proceeding.

The prosecution of Ebel and Diestel was as prejudiced as such things typically are. Before Ebel would defend himself, he demanded to see evidence of what he was being accused of, and to know exactly who was accusing him. This, of course, only damaged his case. Someone who wants to know the charges before answering them is always suspected of buying time. And, then, the doctrine of the "two primordial beings," though meant to bind religion to reason, and piety to history, certainly sounded fishy. It had the ring of a come-on: "My dear, why not retire into the sacristy to continue our discussion of the doctrine of two primordial beings?" It recalls the later wooing of Alma Mahler by Gustav Klimt, in which Klimt, with exquisite high-mindedness, tried to convince her that spiritual and physical love must coexist in every natural relation.

Interrogated, Diestel testified that he and Ebel had talked about sex with married parishioners, and, with what now seems like admirable post-Freudian frankness, had encouraged the "contemplation of nakedness" in discussions of marital relations. Dr. Ebel, Diestel explained, advised husbands who confided doubts about the quality or morality of their conjugal relations to have sex with their wives in the light rather than in the dark, because, as Ebel put it, "the contemplation of nakedness could help to free the fantasy from its images and transform blind lust into conscious affection for the spouse." Strange as this counsel sounds, it echoes contemporary arguments, spurred by internet pornography, to the effect that fantasy can become tyrannical when left to itself, and that the real body, seen plainly, might become an instrument of moral repair.

Ebel's professed views seem mostly wholesome, even presciently modern. He distinguished between two forms of shame: a proper moral recoil from perversity or licentiousness, which restrained vice, and a merely conventional shame felt by spouses at being seen naked by each other. The latter, Ebel argued, was false shame, with no rightful place in a loving marriage. For husbands like the Count, the attempts of the pastors to counsel their wives and make sex more acceptable to them were, Clark suggests, an intolerable infringement on masculine privilege.

Yet the wives may well have been genuinely attracted to clergymen they found more sympathetic, and less sexually demanding, than their husbands. Perhaps the Ebelians practiced some kind of ecstatic spirituality. The repressed women of the circle probably found liberation in escaping brutal marriages and communing with the loving pastor, and, if the escape did sometimes take an intimate turn, it would not have been unprecedented, nor necessarily unforgivable.

Still, the question of what Ebel was doing with his adepts swept through Prussia, dominating the newspapers that had only recently begun to emerge from their eighteenth-century chronicling of obligations to a more modern publicizing role. For a while, Clark tells us, nobody in Königsberg seemed interested in talking about anything other than the lurid lives of the Muckers, as the Ebelians came to be called. Obscurity, in such cases, does not dampen suspicion; it gives the imagination room to work.

Then, as so often happens, pseudoscience supplemented sensationalism. It's astonishing, or should be, that doctors—in an era before antibiotics, anesthesia, or even minimal hygiene, when what they could mostly do was watch, record, and worry—had the same prestige and influence they have now. And so Ludwig Wilhelm Sachs, a Königsberg physician and a former member of Ebel's circle, embittered by his expulsion, intervened. In a tone familiar to those who have not yet repressed memories of the spurious confidence possessed by the past century's "repressed memory" experts, Sachs testified that he could offer a scientific account of what *really* went on among the Ebelians.

Sachs, in the way of pseudo-psychologists, had a fairly monocausal explanation of psychological disturbance: it was due to masturbation. Obsessed with the act as the source of modern moral dissolution, he detected it everywhere, and darkly implied that the circle enacted rituals of masturbation, and perhaps oral sex, under cover of mystical theology. Ebel, Sachs claimed, imagined himself as the "primordial fire entity," and had turned the group's doctrine of primordial beings into a rationale for controlled sexual practices, supposedly consecrated by higher spiritual meaning. Being fire, Ebel was free to inflame women.

On further inquiry, Sachs proved to be projecting more than he was reporting. He himself, it emerged, had a long and creepy reputation as a fondler and harasser of his patients, although their testimonies don't seem to have damaged his credibility. It was the same with the repressed-memory experts of a later age: evidence offered against a claim to authority is taken to confirm the depth of the evil being concealed.

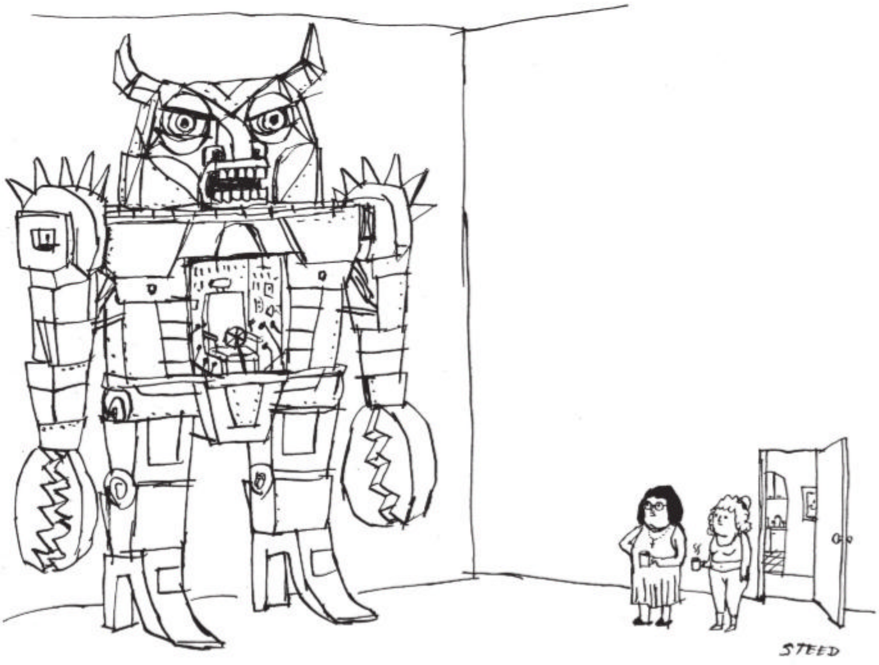
At last, the Royal Cameral Court, in Berlin, issued a judgment. Ebel was found guilty of premeditated breach of professional duty and of founding an "illegal sect." He was permanently dismissed from his post as archdeacon and barred from holding public office. Worse, he was "to be conveyed to a correctional institution and confined there until his 'improvement' could be determined." The sentence was somewhat lightened by the dismissal of charges of personal irregularity: it was sects, not sex, for which he was blamed.

Ebel and Diestel appealed. In 1842, the appellate court reduced the offense from a premeditated breach of duty to a negligent one, acquitted Ebel of founding a sect, and quashed his confinement. But it upheld the dismissal of both clergymen. Ebel stayed briefly in a small house that his supporters had bought for him, then left Königsberg and settled with Ida von der Groeben in Ludwigsburg, where a few faithful Ebelians eventually joined them. The appeal spared him imprisonment and cleared his name but did not restore his career. Some of his followers—as Clark does not report, the consequence being perhaps too far outside his story—ended up in Brazil, carrying the Mucker spirit into the German Protestant settlements of Rio Grande do Sul. There, in the eighteen-seventies, their millenarian movement provoked a bloody conflict with neighbors and the military—an episode still so alive in Brazilian memory that it inspired two films.

It is possible for an inquisition to be unjust and for its targets to be, in some sense, guilty. Many Marranos persecuted by the Inquisition did secretly maintain a Jewish identity. The persecution of American Communists in the nineteen-fifties remains a source of shame, even if some caught up in it, including Julius Rosenberg and his circle, really did place the interests of Stalin's U.S.S.R. above those of their own democracy. It is conceivable that Ebel's women adepts were encouraged to seek sexual consolation in the absence of husbands who knew how to give it. The point is that an inquisition's social cost is so high that its victims' guilt or innocence is only part of the accounting. A society in which persecution, and paranoia about persecution, becomes ordinary pays a price often higher than the evil that the inquisition set out to expose and contain.

In his closing chapter, Clark describes how rationalist critics responded to the scandal. It seemed to prove Kant right. Reason had to triumph in all things, or else waves of unreason, of which the Muckers were a model, would insinuate themselves into daily life. The irony, of course, was that Ebel and his followers considered themselves essentially scientific in their cast of mind, reasoning toward revelation by way of nature.

Still, the most potent answer to the inquisitorial impulses emanating from Prussian Königsberg came from the French philosopher Benjamin Constant. Together with his lover Madame de Staël and their circle, Constant arrived at the idea—not in direct response to the Königsberg scandal but in response to the moralizing public absolutism of the age—that liberty required privacy to flourish. No idea of liberty was sustainable without a companion idea of private life. This, Constant explained, was part of what distinguished modern liberty from ancient liberty. The ancients expected citizens to be publicly visible:



"I hope I never need to use it, but I feel better knowing it's there."

debating, judging, sacrificing, setting examples. The moderns separated public and private life, and allowed the largest possible sphere for private activity: reading, conversing, dining, listening, even (though Constant and de Staël didn't say so, they certainly lived it) conducting agreeable liaisons.

Constant had earlier supplied a forceful hypothetical that involved a murderer at the door: whatever the value of honesty, one had no duty to tell a murderer whether his intended victim was at home. The same moral tact might apply, in less histrionic matters, to the ordinary deceptions and silences by which social life is made bearable. Criticism helpful to a stage performer during rehearsal may be unkind on opening night. The most golden of golden rules was not "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" but "Feel for others as you would want them to feel for you."

An indignant Kant offered a rebuttal to Constant's no-harm-no-foul view: How could you ever know there was no harm if you depended on testimony from those who had committed the foul? If the murderer was at the door, the truth must nonetheless be told, whatever the consequences. (Kant's admirers insist he didn't mean it quite this way, but, if he didn't, it's hard to see what else he meant.) For Kant, exceptions to truthtelling threatened the basis of moral judgment.

On the whole, modern people are constant with Constant in principle and still say "can't" with Kant. We want privacy for ourselves, accountability for others. Although no one believes that Anne Frank should have been betrayed to the Gestapo in obedience to an abstract duty of truthtelling, we readily, even eagerly, suspend Constant's rule of privacy when the private life exposed belongs to an ideological enemy. Republicans, including Brett Kavanaugh during the Clinton years, thought little of cataloguing the intimate details of a sexual relationship between a President and an intern, consensual if shadowed by an inequality of power, for the public humiliation of both. Those of us who despise Trumpism too rarely asked ourselves whether Trump's efforts to conceal an apparently consensual relationship with Stormy Daniels were the proper grounds for prosecution. The law may have had its claims. The appetite with which the intimate facts were consumed had another character.

Yet without an ethic of truthtelling—and truth-seeking—how can we ever hope to judge morality? It's fine for the French, the contemporary Kantian might say, to have Presidents who take their motor scooter to their mistresses' homes and expect it to be kept quiet, but is that how we want to live? Do we prefer to know nothing about the personal lives of our public figures? How do we know the harm being done if we're not in a position to find out? The extent of harm, after all, can be misjudged by those suffering it, and complaints are not always offered by the frightened captive.

"An abstract isolated idea, independent, inflexible and unchangeable—is it fit to be put into use and circulation among mankind?" Constant asked. In a way recalling the morality of Molière's "Misanthrope," the small deceptions and duplicities of ordinary life become more moral for Constant than a categorical insistence on honesty. And so with the Ebelians: we could decide that if no Ebelian was harmed or complained, then let it be, whatever they did and whatever we may think of it.

The Constant reproach to the Königsberg case is that candor and confession can become cruelty by another name. The categorical Kantian, in turn, warns that the cult of privacy can shelter abuse, protecting the powerful from the scrutiny that might expose what they have done. The Prussian within us wants to force everything into the open, insisting that anyone with nothing to hide should be willing to put everything on display. Our inner Parisian wants to protect twilight concupiscence, believing it essential to civility. Between Prussian and Parisian lies a permanent argument of our moral modernity, unresolved and probably unresolvable. We can try to recognize malfeasance while resisting malice, but doing so requires patience, proportion, and case-by-case judgment—qualities made nearly impossible by the modern media, already emerging in Königsberg in the form of newspapers and helping to fuel the scandal there. Meanwhile, the whirlpools of history spin, and ordinary people, good and bad alike, drown in them.

What's odd is that—as the Muckers should surely have foreseen when they contemplated their primordial beings—a streaking fireball colliding with a cascade of water would produce not creative plenitude but a brief, noisy shudder, and then steam and silence. That should have been a warning to them, as it ought to be to us. It isn't. ♦

ON AND OFF THE MENU

EYES UP HERE

Can Hooters revive itself?

BY HANNAH GOLDFIELD

The chain is rebranding as a neighborhood restaurant, sans bikini night.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY JASON FULFORD AND TAMARA SHOPSIN

In the fall of 1995, three decades after the March on Washington, the sports bar and restaurant chain Hooters staged a march of its own. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (E.E.O.C.) had accused Hooters of illegal hiring practices, as part of a four-year probe during which staff were “tripping over federal regulators and investigators in our restaurants,” as Mike McNeil, then the company’s vice-president, complained to the Los Angeles *Times*. The problem was men: Hooters declined to hire them as bartenders or servers, and the commission was demanding that the company create a fund of twenty-two million dollars to be disbursed among victims. Citing the 1964 Civil Rights Act, Marcia Greenberger, an attorney for the National Women’s Law Center, told the *Times* that the law permits exceptions only in obvious cases—“If you needed a wet nurse, you wouldn’t have to offer the job to men”—and pointed out that airlines had once argued that travellers preferred attractive young gals to staff plane cabins, and that they had lost.

McNeil gathered about a hundred Hooters Girls, as they’re formally known, to picket in D.C. They wore branded tracksuits over their uniforms, which consisted of neon-orange hot pants; nude pantyhose, to give the illusion of a suntan; and tight white T-shirts emblazoned with an owl whose big mammiform eyes serve as the double “O”s in the restaurant’s logo. Among the women was Vince Gigliotti, a burly and mustachioed manager at one of the chain’s Florida locations, who had also been featured in full-page newspaper ads and on billboards wearing a Hooters Girl uniform and a long blond wig; the caption read “Washington Get a Grip!” A year after the protest, the E.E.O.C. backed off, deeming it “wiser . . . to devote its scarce litigation resources to other cases.”

Hooters, which was founded in 1983, and expanded, at its peak, to more than four hundred locations worldwide, faced myriad such challenges over the years: lawsuits alleging sexual harassment and discrimination based on body weight and race; an employee protest, in 2021, over the introduction of even shorter, thong-like shorts. It was hardly a shock when Hooters of America, the corporation that controlled franchising rights, declared bankruptcy in 2025. The extinction of the middle-class chain restaurant, from Friendly’s to Red Lobster, appeared all but inevitable. In the age of ubiquitous internet porn, the idea of going to a chicken-wing restaurant to see some cleavage sounded almost quaint.

But Hooters, it turned out, was not going down without a fight. Last fall, Hooters Inc., a separate company that owned the first-ever location, in Clearwater, Florida, among others, acquired more than a hundred additional stores, as well as control of the brand. The plan, according to Neil Kiefer, Hooters Inc.’s C.E.O. since 1992, was for the chain to remarket itself as a family-friendly neighborhood restaurant: there would still be short shorts and snug tops, but no more bikini nights. In the New York *Times*, Kiefer insisted that this effort—to “re-Hooterize,” as he put it—was simply a return to form. “We’re getting back to what makes us a beach-themed restaurant as opposed to a girlie bar,” he said, a claim that struck me as both disingenuous and self-sabotaging. Wasn’t the girlie stuff the whole point?

Admission to the Hooters museum—the “Mus*ee*um,” as the sign hanging above its threshold calls it—at the original Clearwater location is free: hang a right past the hostess stand, attended by what's known as a Hooters Girl at the Door, and you're in. A gallery wall features framed photos of bodacious employees across the decades, as well as the original menu, which advertises the restaurant's signature curly fries as "peeled and squared entirely by hand by an Idaho refugee whom we have chained to the wall in the back room." Artifacts in glass display cases immortalize key moments in Hooters history: toy planes and race cars left over from the brand's short-lived airline and its Nascar sponsorship; a dusty stainless-steel contraption known as a celery jig, invented by the first Hooters chef, Chuck Riley, to cleanly slice stalks in half before serving them with wings.

As it happens, Riley is still on the payroll, and works most days at the company headquarters, a squat two-story building a few hundred yards behind the restaurant. Not long ago, I found him—slim and boyish but for a shock of gray hair and wise, hangdog eyes—in a wood-panelled test kitchen that doubles as the company canteen, tossing batches of fried shrimp in a variety of sauces. When I marvelled at the fact that he'd spent four decades at Hooters, Riley smiled sheepishly and said, "Why not?" On speakerphone, he consulted with Gil DiGiannantonio, a Hooters founder who spearheaded the original menu—the pair learned to operate a deep fryer together—and who was weighing in from his home in Colorado.

DiGiannantonio was part of a group of six men, most of them young, married fathers working in industries such as general contracting and liquor sales, who opened Hooters on a lark. The joke, now cemented in company lore, is that they needed a place they couldn't get kicked out of. "At the time, there were a lot of what you'd call 'fern bars,'" Kiefer, who started as the restaurant's lawyer, told me, referring to a category of upscale hangouts, decorated with potted plants and Tiffany lamps, that were meant to facilitate yuppie courtship. "We were sort of the opposite of that."

Ed Droste, another of the original six, who worked in real estate, had a knack for marketing. The name and the mascot were inspired by a Steve Martin bit: "I believe it's derogatory to refer to a woman's breasts as 'boobs,' 'jugs,' 'winnebagos,' or 'golden bozos,' and you should only refer to them as 'hooters.'" In Kiefer's telling, he and Droste were at the beach with their wives when they handed a business card to a buxom blonde named Lynne Austin, who had just won a bikini contest, and asked her if she wanted to work at a restaurant. Like Venus from the sea foam, the Hooters Girl was born, an archetype that encompassed both sunny good looks and an unusually cozy kind of hospitality: at Hooters, your server might slide into the booth next to you while taking your order for a pitcher of Bud Light.

In Clearwater, I went to lunch with two former Hooters Girls: Becky Moore, the company's director of learning, development, and training; and Andrea Hill, the executive vice-president in charge of all Texas locations. At a high-top table, Hill, a sleekly dressed Black woman in her forties, took charge of ordering a spread of her favorite dishes—honey Thai shrimp, sweet-and-spicy Daytona Beach wings, deep-fried pickles, and snow-crab legs—and made sure that everyone had plenty of paper towels to wipe their hands. Hill was a college student when she was first hired at Hooters, in Chicago, where she'd be flying later that afternoon: her best friend, her "literal Day One" from her time as a server, was expecting a grandchild, and she was going to the baby shower.

This sense of continuity turned out to be a prominent feature of the Hooters universe: Moore, a bubbly eastern-Florida native in her late thirties who started at the chain out of high school, told me about her "honorary nephew," Chase—a teen-ager whose parents had brought him in regularly as a toddler. Our server, a recent college graduate named Brianna, had grown up in the restaurant, too. Her mother, Kimberlie Bennett, another former Hooters Girl, is now the company's financial controller.

I asked Moore and Hill, tentatively, what they might say to someone who characterizes Hooters as exploitative of women. Neither of them flinched. "I believe, personally, that people just don't know," Hill said. "I don't know many companies that—I was a Hooters Girl eleven years ago, and I'm the executive vice-president now. I don't have conventional management experience, I don't have an M.B.A., but they invested in me." The uniform, she said, wasn't so different from the one she'd worn as a cheerleader. "And anything that I felt about it, I would turn around, and everybody else had it on, too."

"There was always a girl there that would have your back," Moore added. When I recounted my own experience of working at a restaurant, and the sting of secondhand humiliation I'd felt when a co-worker was sent home because her bra straps were showing, both women nodded sympathetically. A high-school classmate of mine who happily worked at Hooters for five years told me that she'd felt more objectified, and been more frequently harassed, when she got a job at a higher-end bar. Maybe there was something valuable in the Hooters approach of saying the quiet part out loud.

In 2018, the writer and director Andrew Bujalski released a film called "Support the Girls," about the staff of a fictional restaurant called Double Whammies. (Hooters has inspired so many imitators, including Twin Peaks and Ojos Locos, that it's considered the originator of a genre: the breastaurant.) When I asked Bujalski recently what drew him to the setting, he described it as a riddle: he liked "the idea that no two customers, no two waitresses, quite have the same idea of what this place is supposed to be and supposed to mean."

A few weeks ago, I took my family to the Hooters in Long Beach, California, after a visit to the aquarium, a short walk away. Perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised to count some thirteen children in the bustling dining room. As far as my own two kids were concerned, this was a restaurant designed for them: cute animal mascot; televisions on every wall; young women with the same friendly, patient countenance as their camp counsellors offering crayons, tater tots, and lemonade. The food exceeded no one's expectations, but the beer was cold and the price was right. "I love Hooters!" my seven-year-old son declared. Who was I to argue with him? ♦

Department of Delicacy

From the Belmont (Mass.) Citizen-Herald.

A Creeley Road resident reported someone wrote an anatomically correct term on his fence in spray paint.

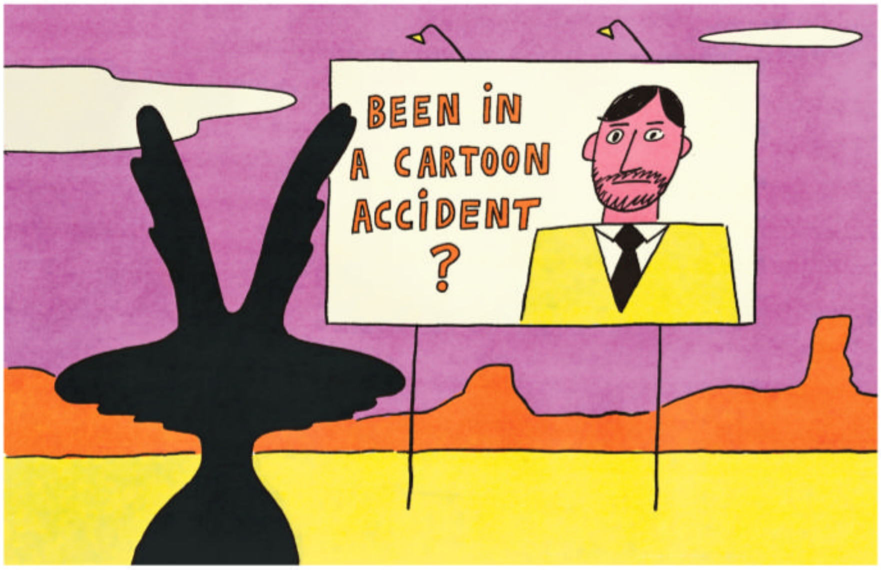
THE CURRENT CINEMA

FINE TOONING

"Coyote vs. Acme."

BY JUSTIN CHANG

In the 1952 "Looney Tunes" short "Operation: Rabbit," Bugs Bunny encounters another member of the cartoon-critter pantheon. "Allow me to introduce myself," the figure says, brandishing a business card. "My name is Wile E. Coyote, Genius." It wasn't quite the character's first appearance—he'd made his début three years earlier, chasing the Road Runner, in "Fast and Furry-ous" (1949)—but it was the first time he'd been given a name and the gift of words (delivered by the voice actor Mel Blanc). The name would stick; the words would fade. Bugs, with his carrot-chomping patter, naturally brought out the character's talkative side in their occasional matchups. But it was the Road Runner who swiftly became Wile E. Coyote's nemesis, and they shared a commitment to muteness—"Beep-beep!" notwithstanding—that gave their hunter-and-hunted dynamic a primal undertow. They didn't need dialogue to define them, especially since their chases played out to such an expressive soundtrack of crashes and booms—the music of a predator's disastrously ill-advised attempts to capture his prey.


BEEN IN A CARTOON ACCIDENT ?

In Dave Green's film, Wile E. Coyote seeks compensation for his many injuries.

One of the modest but telling charms of "Coyote vs. Acme," a new feature-length comedy from the director Dave Green and the screenwriter Samy Burch, is that the eponymous canine never breaks his vow of silence—a nod to tradition that also serves a narrative purpose. In a story that draws loose inspiration from Ian Frazier's brilliant humor piece "Coyote v. Acme," which was published in this magazine in 1990, Wile E. Coyote needs someone who can speak on his behalf. He finds that someone in Kevin Avery (Will Forte), a bumbling personal-injury lawyer from Albuquerque, who reluctantly agrees to represent him in a lawsuit against the Acme Corporation, the manufacturer of the many, many products that his client has ordered by mail over the years to help catch the Road Runner, to worse than no avail. The movie's early passages are an epic ode to buyer's remorse, reminding us, with a mix of newly shot action scenes and excerpts from classic "Looney Tunes" shorts, that every one of the plaintiff's Acme purchases—they include rocket-powered roller skates, electromagnetic gloves, tiny slingshots, enormous catapults, and anvils and explosives galore—has malfunctioned and backfired, with hilariously punishing results.

For all that, Kevin—whose law practice is named for the Warner Bros. animation legends Tex Avery, Chuck Jones, and Michael Maltese—doesn't think his client, whom he addresses as Wile E., has much of a case. Especially against a mega-conglomerate like Acme, which is variably described as "the biggest corporation in the world" and "a family-values company that values its family . . . of companies." Kevin, hapless and lazy, is no match for Acme's army of super-slick lawyers, who are led by Buddy Crane, a heavyweight in every sense; he's played, with beefy swagger, by the actor and former professional wrestler John Cena. But Kevin is fortunate to have an ambitious intern, Paige (Lana Condor)—she's also his niece—who takes one look at Wile E.'s sky-high pile of Acme junk and sees not just a damning mountain of evidence but also signs of a sinister conspiracy. The film, blending animation and live-action footage, takes the form of a detective story, following such precursors in this hybrid medium as "Who Framed Roger Rabbit" (1988) and "Looney Tunes: Back in Action" (2003). Truth be told, the plotting isn't quite up to the strength of the premise, but the slight slackness of structure has the benefit of being able to accommodate an array of "Looney Tunes" characters in bit parts, with narrative priority for the birds: here's Daffy Duck as a fount of mournfully deranged backstory, Tweety as a kind of diminutive double agent—a canary trap—and, most effectively, Foghorn Leghorn as a preening, menacing Acme overlord.

The revelations hinge, unsurprisingly, on a cruel double standard in the ways humans and toons are treated. In a richer version of the story, the dubious codes and customs of this animation-apartheid society might themselves have become a compelling source of mystery, the way they did in "Who Framed Roger Rabbit," but no matter. It's a relief to note what "Coyote vs. Acme" isn't and a pleasure to celebrate

ILLUSTRATION BY ANTONY HUCHETTE

what it is. It isn't a flailing, content-regurgitating C.G.I. shit storm in the manner of "Space Jam: A New Legacy" (2021), one of the latest studio movies to attempt this kind of mashup, but, rather, a fleet, funny, often elegant throwback, made by artists with an obvious but not overweening reverence for the original "Looney Tunes" universe. (At one point, the filmmakers playfully sound a note of righteous contempt: Pepé Le Pew gets about a second of screen time, just so he can be cancelled as an odious sex pest.) The film has a gorgeous, crisply delineated surface; the hand-drawn lines of the animations both pop out from and mesh seamlessly with their live-action environments. The toon characters mine the intersection of those modes for inspired bursts of comic mayhem, whether in the various signs that Wile E. holds up to communicate or in the recurring spectacle of falling cartoon projectiles crashing into actual, physical property.

Forte has always had something of a cartoon-ready constitution, with his rubbery physicality and goofball charm. His performance here is all sheepish grins and Gumby limbs, jutting out of a tan suit that, juxtaposed with his scraggly dark hair, makes him almost a visual correlative to the brown and beige of Wile E. Coyote himself. Both characters are deeply acquainted with the stench of failure. The crucial difference is that Kevin has allowed it to define and crush him, whereas Wile E. sees it as a source of renewal—a kind of reverse Kryptonite. This lean, mean, yellow-eyed desert canine remains among the leading optimists of his era, and "Coyote vs. Acme" casts his back-to-the-drawing-board tirelessness, his single-minded pursuit of his obsession, in unabashedly heroic terms. More than once, the script references Sisyphus, one of the few characters in fiction who can rival its protagonist for bad luck with boulders. Even when he's holed up in a fleabag motel in Albuquerque before and during the trial, Wile E. has no use for downtime. As industrious as ever, he spends night after night poring over blueprints and devising Rube Goldberg machines, including one to insure that Kevin, snoozing away next door, will be awake, dressed, and ready to go in the morning. Genius never sleeps.

At the beginning of "Coyote vs. Acme," we see a logo for Warner Animation Group, one of the film's production companies, which is pointedly described onscreen as "a wholly owned subsidiary of the Acme Corporation." Near the end of the closing credits, there's a dedication "to everyone who posted, shared, held up signs, and spoke out when it counted. This film made it to the big screen because of you." The target of these two bookending messages is the film's original distributor, Warner Bros. Discovery, which abruptly shelved the movie in 2023, in exchange for a tax writeoff. It wasn't the only occasion in recent years that the company, ridden with debt, had pulled the plug on its own product, squandering the time and talent of all involved; the never-completed movies "Batgirl" and "Scoob! Holiday Haunt" were fellow-victims. But "Coyote vs. Acme" was a finished work, and the looming probability that the film would never see the light of day provoked an industry-wide outcry. Three years later, "Coyote vs. Acme" is finally being released in theatres by another distributor, Ketchup Entertainment—a name that can only be properly honored, I'd suggest, by a trip to the Warner studio gates, with a basket of rotten tomatoes at the ready.

"Coyote vs. Acme" may not be a great movie, but, as a story that pits a scrappy underdog against the forces of soulless corporate malevolence, it does come equipped with a pretty great metaphor for its own Hollywood misfortunes. The movie's final showdown takes place at a U.S. Senate hearing, presided over by none other than Elmer Fudd. I couldn't help but think of the congressional proceedings that have already happened, and of the federal trial that looms, as Paramount Skydance—the bloated, Trump-aligned Acme of the media landscape—seeks to devour what remains of Warner. It's a merger that doesn't bode well for movies, cartoons, or humans. Amid such real-world bleakness, the ending of "Coyote vs. Acme" manages an unexpected wallop: a quietly moving reaffirmation of the immortal bond between Wile E. Coyote and the Road Runner, comic adversaries who turn out, beneath the fur and the feathers, to be kindred spirits. I was reminded, of all things, of Barbara Stanwyck in "The Lady Eve" (1941), one of the finest movies Paramount—indeed, Hollywood—ever produced, summing up her character's love for Henry Fonda's dopey dreamboat: "I need him like the axe needs the turkey." But which is the axe, and which is the turkey? And does Acme carry either? ♦

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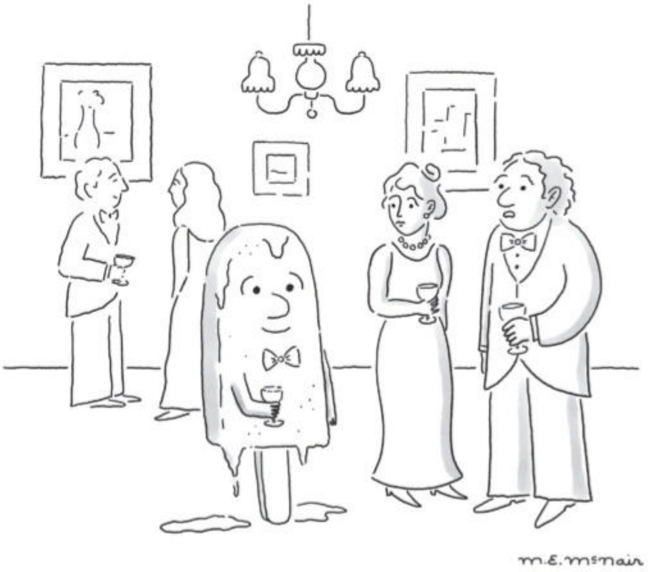
CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Elisabeth McNair, must be received by Sunday, August 30th. The finalists in the August 10th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the September 14th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



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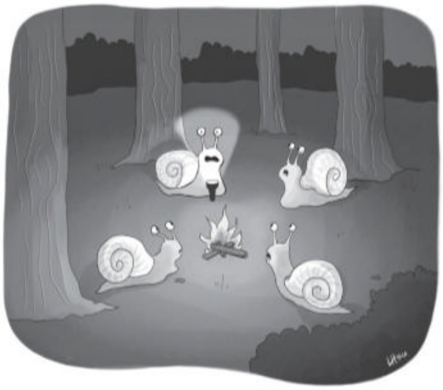
THE FINALISTS

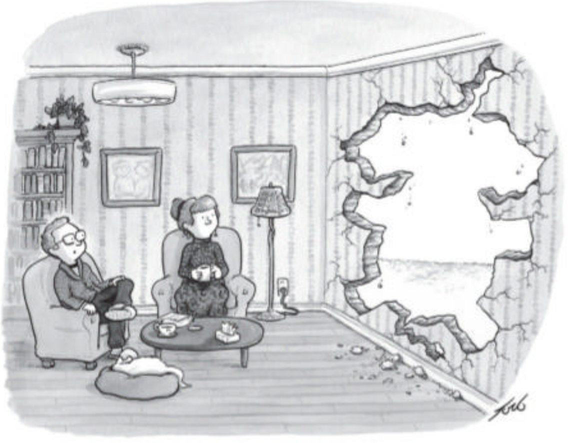


“You can hide, but you can't run!”
Jio Park, Los Angeles, Calif.

“The trail led me to a fork in the road. A tiny fork.”
Izabela Kline, Burbank, Calif.

“It's scarier if I tell it in French.”
Brandon Lawniczak, Mill Valley, Calif.

THE WINNING CAPTION



“I think it's time we addressed the room itself.”
Pao Roy, New Orleans, La.

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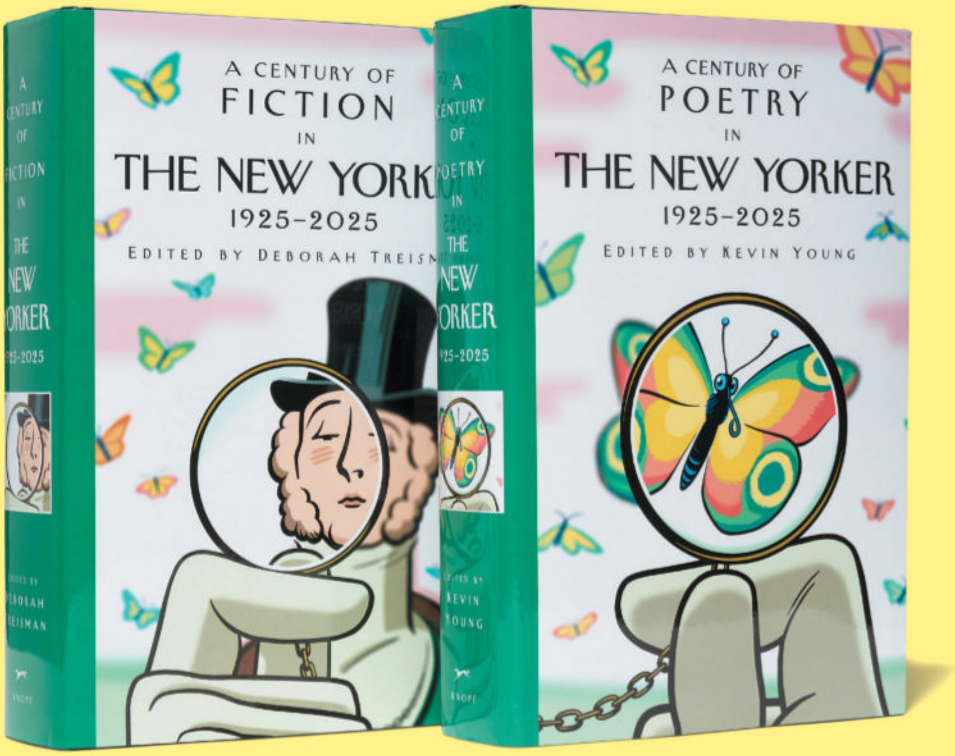
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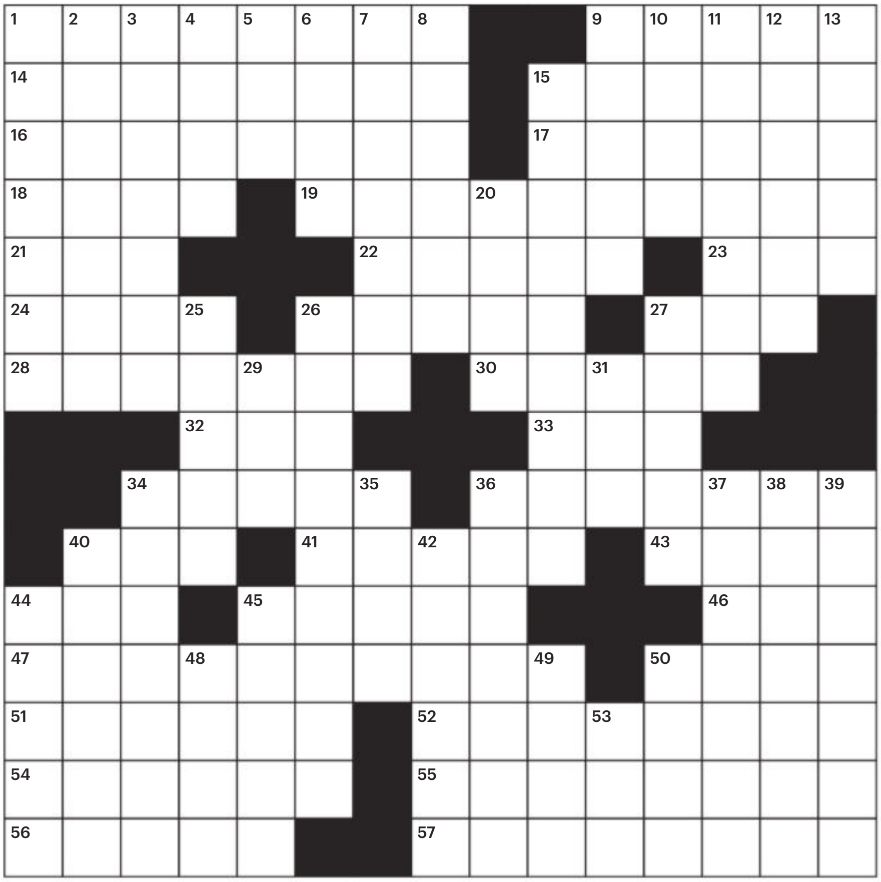
BY ROBYN WEINTRAUB



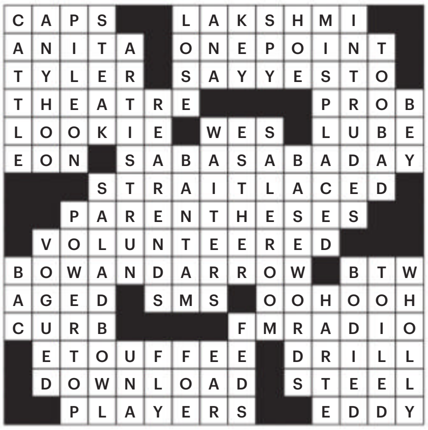
ACROSS

1 "*Definitely* not interested"
9 Insects that pollinate fig trees
14 Question asked in the wee hours of a sleepover
15 2025 Chloé Zhao film named for Shakespeare's son
16 Chomp on, as an apple
17 The ___ Bird (mascot for Baltimore's M.L.B. team)
18 Classic polo-shirt brand
19 One of a pair in "The Twelve Days of Christmas"
21 Ontario's largest city, on scoreboards
22 Peruses the paper, say
23 Pizzazz
24 Taylor Swift's "___-Hero"
26 Personal-record-setting performances
27 "___ Mis"
28 Adornments for mortarboards
30 Didn't get a seat on the bus, say
32 Man's name made up of three consecutive letters
33 Man's name that's also an investment initialism
34 "Less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art Sections are women, but 85% of the ___ are female" (declaration on a 1989 poster by the art activists Guerrilla Girls)
36 Took a quick look (at)
40 Big or little digit
41 Tower of ___ (part of a Bible story about the origin of linguistic diversity)
43 "I just had the identical experience!"
44 Non-pro?
45 Guiding principle
46 Most common Korean surname
47 Purchases requiring expedited shipping, perhaps
50 Actor-wrestler John of "Blockers"
51 Oblong, cream-filled pastry
52 Unwrap enthusiastically
54 City famous for cheesesteaks, for short
55 Film erroneously announced as Best Picture instead of "Moonlight," in 2017
56 Mistakes at the keyboard
57 Hydrogen, helium, and a hundred and sixteen others

DOWN

1 Grassland or desert, to a wildlife biologist
2 State that's home to Grand Canyon National Park
3 Witty comebacks
4 Like rainbow-colored hair
5 Luau dish made of mashed taro
6 Patty or Selma, to Maggie Simpson
7 Surgeon's stitches
8 Reproductive bits of ferns and fungi
9 Peddlers' merchandise
10 Within
11 Dozed
12 Elvis the ___ (nickname referencing Elvis Presley's gyrating dance moves)
13 Like scream-inducing roller-coaster drops
15 "Stop squirming!"
20 Skin pics
25 Copy of a magazine
26 Fruit often found in muffins
27 Burdens for many college students
29 Approximation posted by an airport gate: Abbr.
31 "Let You Love Me" singer Rita
34 Like a textured shower mat
35 Grains on the beach
36 "In your dreams!"
37 Tin for a pastry chef
38 Esteemed
39 Doesn't just request
40 Easily upset
42 Volkswagen model that's the subject of the game punch buggy
44 Advanced very slowly
45 Works arduously
48 Part of an angel costume
49 Word in many retailer e-mails
50 Singer Nat or Natalie
53 He's the guy for ewe!

Solution to the previous puzzle:



C	A	P	S	■	■	L	A	K	S	H	M	I	■	■
A	N	I	T	A	■	O	N	E	P	O	I	N	T	■
T	Y	L	E	R	■	S	A	Y	Y	E	S	T	O	■
T	H	E	A	T	R	E	■	■	■	■	P	R	O	B
L	O	O	K	I	E	■	W	E	S	■	L	U	B	E
E	O	N	■	S	A	B	A	S	A	B	A	D	A	Y
■	■	■	S	T	R	A	I	T	L	A	C	E	D	■
■	■	P	A	R	E	N	T	H	E	S	E	S	■	■
■	V	O	L	U	N	T	E	E	R	E	D	■	■	■
B	O	W	A	N	D	A	R	R	O	W	■	B	T	W
A	G	E	D	■	S	M	S	■	O	O	H	O	O	H
C	U	R	B	■	■	■	■	F	M	R	A	D	I	O
■	E	T	O	U	F	F	E	E	■	D	R	I	L	L
■	D	O	W	N	L	O	A	D	■	S	T	E	E	L
■	■	P	L	A	Y	E	R	S	■	■	E	D	D	Y

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